

THE HEIR OF THE MALIK

By
Michael John







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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Philip Carr said, "I also would do even as Rosières Sahib did, and go even where he went." For fourteen days Carr and Akhbar Shah, the Pathan, travelled through the Khyber northwards to the land of the Malik.

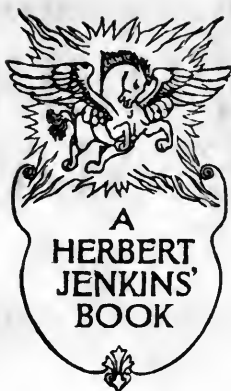
In the land of the Pathan, with its blood feuds, cruelty, craft and dishonesty, but fascinating to a degree, Carr lived. There, in the Kunar Valley, he found adventures an every day occurrence; but none more exciting than his adventures in love.

There is no attempt to attribute to the North West Frontier tribes virtues they do not possess, but credit is given for their undoubted bravery, their insistence upon independence and freedom from control in any form, and, under certain circumstances, their loyalty to others.

THE HEIR OF THE MALIK

BY
MICHAEL JOHN

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The names and characters in this book are fictitious

THE HEIR OF THE MALIK

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE TESTAMENT OF CAPTAIN JOHN ROSIÈRES

“**T**HANK you, gentlemen, I think that is all. You may go. We meet again on the tapes in two hours’ time. It is now 2.25 a.m. Please check your watches by mine. Carr, will you stop behind?”

Three subalterns, in raincoats slimy with wet mud, crawled up the dug-out steps, followed by the company sergeant-major, and were lost in the dismal wetness of the night.

John Rosières and Carr, a boy of about twenty, and the junior subaltern of the

company, had the small underground chamber to themselves.

John Rosières crammed the map he had been using into his pocket, recharged his pipe, lit it from the candle stuck on an empty cigarette tin on the box before him (bad trench etiquette at the best of times), and glared in silence at the youthful Carr. If there was something compelling about John Rosières's words, there was something even more about his silence. Short of stature, ruddy of face and of thick-set figure, he had the air of one accustomed to being obeyed. He radiated authority, and few could stand the enigmatic vigour of his gaze.

Although Carr had been his subaltern for over nine months, he knew little of his company commander, for he was an uncommunicative man. It was known that John Rosières in his forty-odd years of life had wandered much. He showed an astonishing familiarity with all the more remote countries of the globe: he had been known to use odd, unfamiliar words, when off his guard: his servant, Private Tomkins, reported that he sometimes spoke strange languages in his sleep. But no one in the

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company, which feared rather than loved their commander, could tell you anything of his history.

At length he broke the silence. "I have been ordered by the colonel," said he to Carr, "to send one subaltern out of the line, to help to reconstitute the battalion after to-morrow morning's picnic. You will proceed at once to the transport lines. Don't argue with me! I know you want to go over with your platoon. You can go."

John Rosières looked at his watch. A curious, almost wistful expression passed over his weather-beaten, deeply furrowed face. "But stay, you needn't go for a minute or two. Sit down and talk to me. We both have a quarter of an hour to spare."

Carr took off his steel helmet, or "battle-bowler," to use the slang of the period, and sat down in it. Was the silent little man going to speak? He knew that it was useless to ask to stay. There was silence for a few moments; then John Rosières spoke.

"You wonder, I suppose, Carr, why I have chosen you for the—er—doubtful benefits of survival. Don't think for one moment that I have any presentiments of approaching

death, or any damned nonsense like that. I know that none of us stands an earthly chance of coming out of to-morrow's entertainment alive. You go one way, to live, and I the other, to die. The gods alone know who has the better fate, as Socrates remarked on a similar occasion. I am sending you out, not because I think you are in any way superior to the other fellows, but merely because you are the youngest of us. I, and the others, have had at least a good ration of life. You have the bulk of yours still to consume.

“I have no affairs to settle. My bankers will attend to that. I have no sentimental messages for you to take to my relatives. The quartermaster will dispatch my kit to my next-of-kin, without your assistance. I bequeath you, however, one thing, and may it do you no harm. In my valise you will find a leather wallet, with my name on it. You are welcome to the contents. You might as well have it as my next-of-kin, a minister of the dourest kind, and who would certainly be shocked if he read it.”

The hard face of John Rosières softened for a minute. A curious light came into his

pale blue eyes. "I am a little sorry, Carr, to leave this world. It has been damnable interesting. I have treated life as a magnificent dinner. I have not lived on, as it were, a diet of suet pudding. I have eaten everything and indiscriminately, from the *hors d'œuvres* to the liqueurs of experience. I hope that I now embark on an even greater adventure. Still, if you put up a cross over my grave, write on it 'VIXI,' I have lived. By God, I have!" and John Rosières sank into deep thought.

He seemed to hesitate, then rose and for a few moments whispered quietly into Carr's ear.

Suddenly, he looked at his watch, and was his old alert, commanding self again. "Three o'clock, Carr. You must go," said he, in a firm voice; "otherwise you will get mixed up in this plebeian brawl. Good morning to you. May your feet never grow weary, as the Pathans say. Get a move on whilst it's still quiet." And so saying, he dismissed young Carr, who, at a loss for words, climbed up the greasy dug-out stairs, over the recumbent forms of several signallers and orderlies, and was soon striding hard down the battered *pavé* road, towards the transport lines and life.

CHAPTER II

THE RIOT IN THE KUCHA RANJHA

FOUR years later, we find Philip Carr towards evening, when the Indian world has risen from its afternoon siesta, walking slowly through the crowded streets of Amritsar city. It is not generally considered wise by those who know the country to wander alone through native bazars, however interesting they may be. But to Carr the spectacle of native life was fascinating : he loved the mysterious houses, the weird temples and mosques ; he liked to watch the gaily-coloured crowd, the beggars all covered with sores, the honest Punjabi country fellows with their long, vigorous stride and "lathi" on their shoulders, the fat and greasy "bunnias" seated amongst their piles of "atta" and maize, the vendors of sugar-cane, the refreshment sellers with their iron trays of curry and "chapaties," the sweet vendors with their unappetising

stores of sugary messes all coated with swarms of flies, the pale and shifty faces of the babus.

A smell of rancid ghee frying the evening meal, mingling with that of burning dung cakes, dried perspiration and all the indescribable filth of a native city, filled the air. Bheesties, staggering under their heavy skins, flung water to lay the dust. A medley of cries of drivers of bullock carts trying to force their way through the crowded alleys, of street hawkers selling their wares, mixing with the clang of tonga bells, gave the streets an air of childish and distracting confusion.

At the end of the war, Philip Carr had come to India in the Public Works Department, and for three years had wandered up and down the Punjab. He was not like many men, who regard India as a land of exile. The country genuinely interested him. He had an unusual faculty for acquiring native languages, and daily found something new amongst the many races of India which fired his imagination and stimulated his curiosity.

His delight was to go out shooting and

tramp all day under the burning sun, to camp at night in some remote district and talk to the villagers in the evening, by the well, of the rains, of the iniquities of the Canal Department, of intricate lawsuits, of the judgments of the courts in religious disputes, of the new system of government, and even of the late war.

Curiously enough, as he strolled through the bazar, Carr was thinking of John Rosières, dead four years ago at Ennemain. Certainly he had not forgotten him—a vigorous personality like his is not soon forgotten—but he had faded into the background of Carr's mind. Carr still had amongst his luggage the leather wallet John Rosières had bequeathed him, and at infrequent intervals read its contents—a very bulky diary. Rosières seemed to have led a wandering and eventful life, in many countries and capacities. Carr had never read the diary right through. Occasionally he would open it at random and read a page or two. It was a mine of curious information, and often very difficult to follow. The writer would dilate at great length on some apparently trivial matter such as the ease

with which "Worcester sauce," made from a recipe of a nobleman in the country could be obtained at any wayside "posada" in Chile, or the diseases and matrimonial habits of the Bactrian camel; but of personal details and motives the diary was singularly sparing.

"Huzoor," said a voice at his elbow. Carr turned to see a Punjabi policeman, in khaki drill and wearing a blue and red pagri, standing at his elbow. "There is a meeting at the end of the street—a political meeting." The constable said no more. It would be impertinent for him to offer advice to a sahib and add that it would be unwise to go farther. "Good," replied Carr, his curiosity aroused; "I will certainly go." The policeman saluted, doubtless further confirmed in his opinion that all the "Sahib Log" were mad; and withdrew from what he hoped his superiors would not consider his duty, should there be trouble.

At the end of the street, Carr came upon a crowd of some two hundred people in a small square. They were, for the most part, low-class natives of poor physique, the riff-raff of the population of a city of mean

iniquity. There was scarcely a manly figure amongst them, except three or four Sikh cultivators, big, healthy sons of the Punjab, leaning on their long "lathis"—bamboo staves with heavy heads shod with lead, and the weapon of the country. Near by stood a tall man of about forty-five years of age, clad in dirty cotton clothes and with a filthy pagri tied carelessly round his head. He was watching the meeting with an air of mingled curiosity and contempt, but his eyes were never for one moment still. He had an air of being always on the alert—the air of a tiger in its native jungle, of an eagle on some remote and barren height. "A man amongst a crowd of curs, a hawk amongst a flock of carrion crows—a trans-frontier Pathan," said Carr to himself, and turned to listen to the speakers.

In the centre of the crowd a rough platform had been erected, and grouped round the foot of it were about twenty youths, with yellow garlands of flowers around their necks and wearing little coarse cotton caps. A banner bearing the dyspeptic portrait of Mr. Ghandi floated over their heads. These were the product of the wonderful Victorian

panacea for all the ills of India—education. Apparently, it did not matter what they were taught so long as they were taught something—preferably something which disturbed their already feeble moral standards and put nothing in their place, something which made the degenerate little city gutter-rat, the descendant of generations of slaves, think himself superior to the magnificent tillers of the soil, fighters and the sons of fighters, many of whose bones now lie in the rain-sodden fields of Flanders, the gloomy hills of Judea and the deserts of Mesopotamia.

One of these estimable young men now held the platform. His audience was becoming rather apathetic when suddenly he noticed Carr standing on the edge of the crowd. Now was his chance to revive the obviously waning interest of the crowd. Now was his chance to make an oratorical “scoop,” to make himself appear in the eyes of the crowd as the daring protagonist of liberty. Of a surety the white man would not understand what he was saying—he could insult him to his face and in perfect safety win an unprecedented triumph in the eyes of the crowd.

“How much longer are we to endure this damnable tyranny of these white sons of the Devil?” said he, raising his voice. “They come here to suck our life’s blood. While we struggle from sunrise to sunset to earn a miserable pittance, they wallow in luxury at our expense.”

Philip Carr’s face never moved a muscle. Freedom of speech was one of the traditions of his people, even if thereby untruth should prevail.

“Last year,” went on the speaker, “a lakh of people died in the Punjab for want of food—murdered by the white people.”

Philip Carr was still silent—no good could come to the struggling three hundred and fifty millions of India by his causing a disturbance.

Emboldened by his success, for the crowd was now aglow with interest, the speaker continued: “The white people use our country as their pleasure ground. All day they shoot and play, drink fiery liquors and feast on the flesh of murdered cows. Their mem-sahibs, a race of women without shame——”

“Silence! son of a pig!” bellowed a voice

that shook the crowd from end to end. There was a brief scuffle in the crowd, several youths were sent flying, and suddenly they saw the speaker lying in the dust, blood mingling with the red betel juice flowing from his mouth, and Philip Carr standing over him.

A hostile murmur ran through the crowd. Carr saw there was nothing for it but a fight, if he was to escape alive. Snatching a "lathi" from a man near by, he glanced round the crowd. Not a friendly face did he see. Suddenly he noticed the Pathan, who was watching the scene, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "O, Pathan!" shouted Carr, "will you fight with me? Let us drive these black pigs to their sties together." "Indeed I will, Sahib," shouted the Pathan, felling to the ground at one blow the man standing beside him and grabbing his "lathi." Amidst a shower of bottles, looted from the stall of a vendor of syrups, he sprang to Carr's side.

Together they leapt upon the platform of a bunnia's shop, the bunnia himself rolling off the edge in terror and shouting that he was being murdered, in a heap of overturned

baskets of atta and peas. Then the rush came. Round and round swung the heavily loaded staffs of Carr and the Pathan ; many a head received the only really potent argument of the East. The Pathan's eyes sparkled with a fierce joy—this was an entertainment after his own heart.

Suddenly a tremor ran through the crowd. "The police !" someone shouted. Panic seized them, and Carr and the Pathan had the street to themselves.

Carr turned to his companion. "Thank you, my friend," said he, "I am much in your debt. I should like to reward you."

"Three things are most to be desired of all men," replied the Pathan: "a good fight, a bag of rupees, and a beautiful woman. You have given me the best of the three. I require no more."

"Who are you, then ?" said Carr.

"I am Akhbar Shah," replied the Pathan, "son of Ghazokai, of the village of Barsak, in the Kunar valley, in the country of the Amir. I have come to Hindustan for trade."

"I should like to see you again and reward you," said Carr. "If you care

to come, I shall be on the veranda at Mactavish's Hotel at ten o'clock to-morrow night." And telling Akhbar Shah his name, Carr called a tonga and returned to his hotel, his tussore silk suit torn to ribbons, his solar topi smashed to pieces, his face covered with blood, but a strange, fierce joy in his heart.



CHAPTER III

THE GAP IN THE TESTAMENT

ON the morrow, just after tiffin, when the great pause comes in the Eastern day and all the world seeks shelter from the merciless rays of the sun, Philip entered his room in the hotel, selected a fat Burma cheroot, and flung himself upon his bed. Above, the tireless electric fan whirled with irritating monotony.

He had been busy all the morning, and was physically tired, but his mind was active. He felt an inclination to rest, but not to sleep, and soon fell to thinking of the events of the previous evening.

Akhbar Shah . . . he had seen that name somewhere. Where? It was quite a common Mussulman name. Then, in a flash, he suddenly thought of John Rosières's diary.

Without rising from his bed, he raised his voice and shouted: "Bearer." It rang through the silent compound. Bijli, the

sweeper, recumbent upon his string bed and "huqqa" to his lips, suddenly abandoned the contemplation of his exceedingly dirty wife and seven even dirtier children, and was immediately galvanised into animation. He sprang from his bed and beat hard upon the wooden door of the hovel in which his Excellency the Bearer was enjoying a few hours' quite unmerited repose. "Sirdar Ji ! Sirdar Ji !" shouted the sweeper in excited tones. "The Sahib is calling."

Taj Din, the bearer, the lord of the compound, from wandering among the houris of Paradise, came back to the cruel reality of daily life with a shock. Suddenly awakened from sleep, he rapidly adjusted his pagri. He looked a disgusting spectacle. To sleep in the heat of the day is pleasant, but to wake up is abominable. A thousand curses on the Sahib in his heart, he fled towards the room from which the voice came. When all sane people were taking their ease, why could not the mad white man rest also ? Nevertheless, the pattern of tactful obedience, Taj Din was soon standing beside Sahib's bed. "Huzoor," said he, "your Honour called ?"

"Oh, here you are !" said the recumbent

Carr. "You took long enough to come. Look here, under this bed is a box. Open it, and take out the leather wallet which is on top." Taj Din did so, and stood waiting for further orders. Taking the wallet, Carr told him to go, and Taj Din withdrew to dream a little longer on the utter unreasonableness of the white man, who would not rise from his couch to open a box underneath his bed. And yet, had Carr done so, Taj Din would have been the first to consider him a fool. Marvellous are the workings of the Eastern mind! Great, indeed, is the wisdom of the East!

Carr turned over the closely-written pages of the diary. Yes, from 1901 to 1904, John Rosières had been in India—he remembered reading some of the entries. Here were some exceedingly bitter notes on a sardine canning enterprise on the Malabar Coast, which had failed after three months' chequered activity, partly on account of insufficient capital and partly on account of the undoubted distastefulness of the Malabar sardine. Then came a few short notes on John Rosières' career as a traveller for a firm of gramophone dealers. Apparently, about September, 1901, whilst

engaged in this far from lucrative occupation, John Rosières had reached Peshawar, and here came a curious entry :

“ September 9th, 1901—Peshawar. Met one Akhbar Shah, at the shop on Firoz Din in the Lal Kurti Bazar—a cheerful young ruffian from across the Border, and one after my own heart. Says he comes from Barsak in the Kunar valley, but is probably lying. Suggests great profits from the sale of gramophones in Afghanistan. Disguise obligatory. Akhbar Shah suggests that I should go as a Parsi—is this a Pathan joke ? Am much intrigued by the project. At any rate, I shall not be bored if I go. ‘ Ennui ’ is apparently uncommon in Afghanistan.”

Here followed eight completely indecipherable pages, covering at least a period of two years, for they had been written in indelible pencil and had got wet. The next legible entry was dated October 1st, 1903, and had apparently been written in Peshawar.

Carr was now all aglow with interest.

“ October 1st, 1903,” he read. “ Back to

civilisation again, thank God ! After death, shall insist on two years' remittance to my sentence in Hell, on the grounds of my recent intensive course of punishment. Damn Zeba Khanum ! For once, I found a woman even too fierce for my liking. Still, a man of courage and audacity might find in Kunar that which is most to be desired in all the world."

Reading on, Carr found that John Rosières had left India soon afterwards. He turned back to the eight indecipherable pages. What had happened to John Rosières in those two years ? He examined the smudged letters with great care. Scarcely a word was legible. Word by word he scrutinised the obliterated sentences.

On about the fourth page his patience was rewarded. The words "undoubtedly some ore of radium" stood out quite clearly. A page further on he came upon the word "torture" written quite legibly. Later came the word "lizard."

For hours Carr peered over the ruined sheets, but not another word could he decipher.

Suddenly he flung the manuscript from

him and shouted for tea. Taj Din, his bearer, entered almost immediately with it, and was sent away, even more quickly than he had come, to brew some more, as it had undoubtedly been made at least an hour previously.

As Taj Din poured out the freshly made tea, with the air of a life-long member of the R.S.P.C.A. reproached with cruelty to a horse, Carr wondered what "that which is most to be desired in all the world" could be, and for the life of him could not think of an answer.

CHAPTER IV

THE SILENCE OF AKHBAR SHAH

MOONLIGHT shone over Amritsar, calm and clear, softening the harsh colouring of the buildings of the native city, giving them a dignity they lacked by day. Save for the chirping of the crickets or the occasional clanging of a tonga bell, all was still. Would that India never saw the cruel light of the sun, but remained for ever an enchanted kingdom of the moon! That spirit which in the beginning of things brooded upon the face of the waters, floated over Amritsar, unutterably calm, older and greater than good and evil.

Dinner was over in Mactavish's Hotel. The last guests had left the dining-room, and had sought the long cane chairs on their verandas for a final smoke, conscious of having dined well.

Mactavish prided himself on his cuisine. By day he might be seen shuffling about the

premises in an ill-cut cotton drill suit and a Cawnpore topi, the wreck of a white man, his face deeply lined, his eyes yellow, his bearing dejected. He was one of the lost ones, an Englishman who could not go home. Thirty years he had been in India ; and he had never been home. Indeed, he did not now want to go—he had married a Eurasian wife.

Still, his hotel was well run. Mactavish had long since lost the driving power of youth, the high audacity and tireless energy of the white man. Whisky had sapped the vigour of a once keen Scotch intellect. But something else had come in its place—that terrible energy of exasperation, daily made incandescent by a fat Eurasian wife, five shiftless half-caste children, and a cankered liver.

Prone in a long cane chair upon his veranda, smoking a long cheroot, Carr awaited the coming of Akhbar Shah. Only the occasional cough of the watchman violated the perfect peacefulness of the night.

Akhbar Shah was late, but Carr had no doubts about his coming, for he had been promised a reward, and was, moreover, a Pathan, than whom no one is more greedy of gain. His unpunctuality was merely his

transborder method of showing his independence, his contempt for the cow-like obedience of the people of Hindustan.

Could he be the youthful Akhbar Shah of the diary? It seemed more than probable. There could only be one Akhbar Shah of Barsak in Kunar. What could he tell of John Rosières, of the eight obliterated pages of the diary? Could he be induced to explain what was to John Rosières the most desirable thing in all the world?

A cheap Dietz lantern, the kind they sell by the million in the bazar for three rupees, twinkled in the compound. Taj Din, the bearer, approached.

"Huzoor," said he, "there is a Pathan without. He says your Honour wishes to see him."

"Send him here," said Carr. "I shall not want you further to-night. You may go."

Taj Din disappeared into the shadows of the compound.

A minute later the muffled figure of the Pathan stood before Carr, broad shouldered, dignified, aggressive, the fighting man incarnate of the days of darkness of the world.

“ Greeting, Sahib,” said he, without servility. Carr motioned him to be seated, and Akhbar Shah squatted down upon the veranda at his feet. The two regarded each other in silence for a few moments. Carr made a feeble attempt at conversation in Pushto, but Akhbar Shah replied in the beautifully clear and deliberate Urdu of the travelled Pathan.

“ It was a good fight, Sahib,” said Akhbar Shah. “ Such amusement is rare these days in Hindustan, but it will not always be so.” His black and ever-moving eyes twinkled in the moonlight at the thought of the merry days he and his kinsfolk would have when the “ Sahib Log ” had gone.

A currency note changed hands. Akhbar Shah put it away in some hidden fold of his flowing garments. Still, the conversation flagged. There was nothing of the gushing schoolgirl about Akhbar Shah. He was evidently a man of eloquent actions rather than verbal triumphs.

Suddenly Carr plunged, as it were, *in medias res*.

“ I know all about you,” said he, “ Rosières Sahib told me.”

Akhbar Shah bristled like a startled tiger. "The Red Devil!" he exclaimed in Pushto, and checked himself. It is not wise to show emotion before strangers.

His surprise was only momentary. "And how did Rosair Sahib die?" said he, as suavely and plausibly as a skilled barrister.

In the immaculate moonlight of the Indian night, Carr told him of the last great combat of John Rosières, of how, at the head of his company, a raging red-faced fury, he had stormed the German strong-point at Ennemain. He told of how, when the overwhelming counter-attack came, with but two men left, he had held up a whole Prussian battalion for three hours, refusing to surrender; and how, when the line was re-established, they had found John Rosières dead, in the centre of an enormous circle of enemy corpses, shot through and through.

Akhbar Shah was all excitement. He vibrated with interest. A wild, fanatical glare came into his eyes. "A fitting death! a fitting death!" he muttered in Pushto in his beard. "He died as he had lived, a mighty man of valour."

Like some great vulture, Akhbar Shah,

his arms crossed, brooded in silence on the veranda.

“ I also,” said Carr, coldly and deliberately, “ would do even as Rosières Sahib did, and go even where he went.”

Akhbar Shah, without ceremony, abruptly turned to go. “ Sahib,” said he, “ after fourteen days I shall be at the shop of Firoz Din in the Lal Kurti Bazar in Peshawar.” In a minute he was gone.

CHAPTER V

A DEPARTMENTAL INTERLUDE

IT is regrettable that Mr. Philip Carr was not the normal type of respectable middle-class Englishman, the type that works all day in the city and comes back regularly every night to a comfortable house in the suburbs; perhaps later in life is able to afford a house in the Thames Valley—that Nirvana of rustic artificiality, which always seems too delightful to be real. Frankly, he was not one of those who, building up a prosperous business or practice, gain great popular esteem, become recognised authorities on sweet peas, Elizabethan drama, or golf, and who die in an atmosphere of rewarded virtue, to be buried in some select cemetery or hygienically cremated at Golder's Green, regretted (officially) by all who knew them.

Carr emphatically was not one of these. He was unfortunately one of those whose

temperament will not harmonise with the morality of the age in which they live. He felt that he could hardly have been a sincere delegate at the Washington Conference, but was quite sure that he would have been sublimely happy with Sir Henry Morgan at the sack of Panama. Whilst strictly conforming to the moral standards of his race and the class from which he sprang, he knew that he would have been happier as a Lawrence among the Arabs or a Sir Richard Burton amongst the wild peoples of the world. Often in church, which he attended rather because he appreciated the beauty of the service and the venerable traditions which it embodied, than out of religious feeling, he would regret that he had not lived in the age when the Americas were discovered, when a man might conquer a kingdom by his sword and his wits. In an age given over to the consumption of *pêches Melba*, sundaes, ice-cream soda, and other abominations, he cherished a fondness for bread and cheese and ale. He preferred a pipe of good thick twist to the finest Turkish cigarettes, and would have died rather than wear patent leather shoes and spats. In a word,

he was an incurable romantic, entirely deficient of that estimable quality frequently erroneously described as common sense. No one with the qualities of a normal, respectable citizen would have dreamed for one moment of following in the footsteps of John Rosières; but decide to go, he did.

Now the Government of India, in its Olympian wisdom, does not encourage young men, however able, to embark on romantic enterprises in the little-known countries beyond its borders. In fact, the Government of India seldom has time to encourage anything; it is usually far too busy extricating itself from the complications in which it has been involved by fools. No one quite knows what the Government of India really is. At six thousand miles range, it seems an august spirit of unprecedented generosity. At close quarters, when represented by Babu Pichhe Lal it is apt to appear the incarnation of the meanness and inflexibility of a parish council. It is like a great Atlantic liner in a canal, a nightmare to pilots and engineers, which, huge and unwieldy, is eventually brought safely through. Few in the perfect

coolness of their suburban villas or trade union halls give the credit due to the pilots and engineers of the great Indian leviathan who, at a temperature well over 110, take it on its journey.

Now the introduction of Western education into India has produced a mania for correspondence, intelligible and unintelligible, but of colossal volume and ever-growing. The consequence is that every official never has time really to grapple with the problem, and after heart-breaking struggles eventually loses hope. Unscrupulous people, therefore, are apt to take advantage of this and gain concessions which are either granted through an oversight or the incompetence of half-educated clerks.

Philip Carr was due to go on leave for three months in a fortnight's time. He had decided to go to Kashmir and shoot. He had given his address as "Care of the Postmaster, Srinagar," as everybody else does. Having now decided to go to Afghanistan, he determined to secure at any rate some excuse in writing for this highly irregular proceeding.

The letter in which he had applied for

leave was numbered S/L/2183 of 5/5/22, in which he had given his address as Srinagar. So now he wrote to his superior, a hundred miles away, and said: "With reference to my S/L/ 2183 of 5/5/22, for 'Srinagar' read 'Jelalabad.' Please acknowledge."

All turned out as he had anticipated. Of course, his superior's head clerk had lost the original letter or was too lazy to look for it. He typed a letter in reply, saying "Noted," and placed it in the tray at his chief's right hand in a pile of fifty similar unsigned letters. It is to be regretted that Carr's chief, after eight hours' wrangling with contractors over estimates, cursing of inefficient draughtsmen and tantalisation by even more incompetent clerks, signed the letter without even troubling to ask what it was all about.

Carr had an elastic conscience. He felt he had official cognisance for his proposed expedition.

But having secured this babu's triumph, Carr suddenly felt despicably mean, and just before he left for Peshawar that night he wrote to his chief:

Dear Wilkins,

I apologise for playing a very scurvy trick on you about my leave. I am not really going to Srinagar at all, but to Afghanistan. For God's sake keep quiet about it, old man ! I take entire responsibility. Chin-chin !

Yours ever,

Philip Carr.

Wilkins, however, never received the letter. He died at 4.0 p.m. that afternoon of heat-stroke and was buried at 5.15. They sent the letter on to his widow, who had eloped three weeks previously with the manager of a firm dealing in ladies' clothing. She glanced at it carelessly, and having other preoccupations, returned it through the usual channels, whence it will probably reach someone in authority about the year after next.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHOP OF FIROZ DIN

TWELVE days after the departure of Akhbar Shah, Philip Carr left his bungalow in the tiny civil station of Gorakhkot ostensibly for a holiday in Kashmir, but in reality en route for Peshawar.

Taj Din, complete with two hideously painted tin boxes and a colossal bedding roll, also departed for two months' more or less well-earned rest in the paternal hovel in the Murree Hills, there to spend the day seated on the "chubutera," "huqqa" to his lips, in contemplating, completely unmoved, one of the finest views in the world. There he would squat from sunrise till after sunset, watching the family cow and dilating to an unsophisticated audience upon the madness of the "Sahib Log," his own great accomplishments in the arts of civilisation and the family lawsuit.

Nizam-Ud-Din, the khansamah (cook),

flippantly alluded to by Carr as Cæsar Borgia looked forward to a period of blissful repose, "when the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest," and proceeded to invite a number of relatives and friends of dubious respectability to stay in his master's compound. Karim, the syce, regarded with satisfaction the prospect of two months' unrestricted control of the horse's food supply and calculated the minimum necessary to keep it alive. Incidentally, he pondered deeply upon the price he could raise for two sacks of the Sahib's "gram."

Atta Mahomed, the khidmatgar, departed to his village in the hope of arranging a profitable marriage. Mungoo, the sweeper, alone regarded the Sahib's departure with sorrow. If anything, as far as he was concerned, it indicated increased toil, apportioned without consideration or justice.

* * * * *

Firoz Din, carpet dealer in the Lal Kurti Bazar in Peshawar, may have many defects, but he is polite. Seated amongst his heap of richly coloured rugs, which come from Turkestan and Bokhara (and occasionally, it

is to be regretted, from the Mile End Road), with his red beard and ample pagri, he is a venerable figure. He is not among the bigger carpet dealers of the city, who after long experience have come to the conclusion that it is better to sell an Englishman a really good carpet and be satisfied with a mere fifty per cent. profit than to make a hundred per cent. and displease him. Firoz Din is not one of these. He specialises rather in the youthful new-comer who, all aglow with the desire for a bargain, deserts the main streets and the more reputable shops and comes to match his highly developed sense of value against the ingenuous innocence of Firoz Din.

But the sale of carpets, although he pursues this occupation with admirable zeal, is not Firoz Din's main source of income. He has a large and mysterious clientele who seldom enter by the front door. Those whose circumstances demand a rapid removal from the zone of activity of the India police frequently consult Firoz Din and gain their desire, at a price.

Firoz Din knows more about what happened to the eleven rifles which mysteriously

disappeared from the guardroom of the 192nd than the unsophisticated observer would generally suppose.

It was, therefore, with charming politeness, worth in itself a guinea a minute, that Firoz Din welcomed Philip Carr one night to what he was pleased to describe as the "Abode of his wretchedness." He manifested no surprise at the young Sahib calling at his shop at such an unusual hour. Lifting a gaily coloured rug, the kind that comes to Quetta from Kandahar, which screened off the room behind the shop, he mentioned that one with whom the Sahib was acquainted was within.

Philip Carr had left his luggage at the hotel, with a note to the proprietor asking him to take care of it until his return and a sum of money sufficient to pay his bill. He now stood in the semi-darkness of Firoz Din's back room, dressed in a cream silk suit, a light German automatic pistol in his pocket, over two hundred rounds of ammunition in his belt, and—what is more important—two thousand rupees, mostly in notes, disposed in various parts of his person.

He showed no surprise when from somewhere in the back regions appeared the

statue-like figure of Akhbar Shah. The lapse of a fortnight had made him no more communicative than before. Carr could not shake off the feeling that Akhbar Shah was acting under some sort of compulsion. In the uncertain light of the stuffy back room a momentary feeling of misgiving assailed him, but not for long.

Akhbar Shah spoke: "The clothes are ready even as before, Sahib." He lifted another curtain, revealing a small recess lit by a cheap tin lamp of Japanese origin. Carr entered and found the pyjamas, shirt and chuplies (leather sandals) of an ordinary Yusufzai Pathan. Those he quickly put on, concealing his automatic, ammunition and money therein. He then raised the curtain and rejoined the decidedly morose Akhbar Shah, who did not rise at his entry.

At this mark of disrespect a fury entered Philip Carr's heart. He stifled it for a moment, reflecting that the time for disciplinary measures was not yet come. "Get a razor," said he sharply, "and shave my head even as your people." The audacity of placing himself thus at the mercy of a man to whom human life was a mere bagatelle

astonished even the inarticulate Akhbar Shah. John Rosières had come to life again. Oh, nightmare of nightmares! Even his iron nerve was a little shaken as he shaved Philip's head in the manner of the Pathans. The white man was at his mercy. He could remove him with the greatest ease. But something prevented him. Why had Allah released a second time this spirit of destruction from Eblis?

The shaving completed, Akhbar Shah produced a long silk pagri and wound it, in the fashion of a gay young Pathan of consequence, round Philip's head. Finally, Firoz Din, bubbling with flattery, brought out a violet waistcoat trimmed with gold lace, and Carr stood up, a decidedly striking figure, the incarnation of the rather blasé gilded youth of Peshawar, the metropolis of the Pathans. He had no need to smear his face with dye. The sun for three years had already turned his skin a deep brick-red, and you will meet men as light as many Englishmen any day in the hills.

At dawn next day, when the knife-rests which close the road to Jamrud and the Khyber were thrown back, Foot Constable

No. 49, Mohd. Sharif, noticed two Pathans with a couple of donkeys pass out of the cantonment.

They certainly looked a little suspicious, but Mohd. Sharif thought that on the whole it might be better not to be too inquisitive. Firstly, they might violently resent his interference, and secondly, if they were dubious characters, he would have to stay behind at the police station after his duty was completed and make a report.

He therefore yawned and looked the other way.

CHAPTER VII

KHYBER

THE level rays of the rising sun behind them, Philip and Akhbar Shah stepped out manfully across the barren waste which lies between Peshawar and Khyber mouth. Not a green thing was to be seen, but merely stones and shrivelled desert plants. Traffic on the road there was little, for it was the month of May, and the caravans which pass to and fro upon this route dwindle to almost nothing at this season. A few motor-lorries passed, loaded with firewood for the troops in the pass, covering the wayfarers with dust. Akhbar Shah, to prevent himself from being choked, gripped the end of his pagri between his teeth.

To avoid unpleasant questions at Jamrud, which lies a tangle of coal-heaps, dumps and dusty tentage around a hideous fort of mud, baking in the sun, they made a wide detour

and came eventually to the wedge-shaped gap in the hills which is Khyber mouth. On either side, great masses of rock, brown and reddish-brown, rose stark out of the plain, harsh and forbidding as the walls of some colossal prison in the nethermost depths of Hell, barren as the earth before the advent of light.

Onward and onward they strode, upward and upward, along the winding road which runs right to the borders of the country of the Amir—a boon to thousands of weary caravans and an honour to the men who made it. On either side rose gaunt and jagged hills, often crowned with a tiny picket, garrisoned by little bodies of troops, who in discomfort and monotony keep open the way.

The rare tourist, who in a motor-car travels the length of the pass and back in a single day, will probably descant upon its arid grandeur, its appalling loneliness. Philip Carr, his shirt sticking to his back, his "chuplies" chafing his heel, had little inclination towards sweeping generalisations. Akhbar Shah seemed tireless; nay, seemed to have much energy to waste in thrashing the

wretched donkeys. Though they had already marched fifteen miles, he showed no disposition to halt.

They passed a small camp surrounded by barbed wire. Outside the tiny hut used as a mess by the officers, Carr's eye lit upon a bottle of beer and a glass, placed on a board to tempt the weary traveller in. Then only did he realise how completely he had cut himself off from his own kind.

Overhead, the aerial ropeway began to work, carrying with leisurely dignity cases of rations, bags of flour and firewood across stupendous depths. The tribesmen hated it when it was first installed. Now they regard it in a more friendly manner, for an agile and enterprising man can, with some difficulty, hook off an occasional package, such as a bag of flour, sufficiently valuable to keep him in affluence for many days. The occupation has all the glamour of a fish-pond at a parochial bazaar with the added attraction of risk, entirely in harmony with Pathan tastes. Sher Jan, Afridi, however, feels strongly on the subject and it is not wise to mention it in his presence. One morning, under the eyes of a picket, he

hooked off a large packing-case. In spite of a bullet wound in the calf of his right leg, he carried it for eight miles over rocky heights which would have made a goat feel giddy, met his brother-in-law, who rather forcibly tried to share the plunder, and shot him. At last, safely ensconced behind a lonely rock, he opened the case. It contained no less than one hundred and fifty-seven books, destined for a regimental school. Sher Jan now finds his time fully occupied with a blood feud with his brother-in-law's family. It is not wise to ask his views on the subject of education.

A small party of British soldiers, halted by the roadside, hove in sight. Carr noted with approving eye the excellent fitting of their equipment and the soundness of their boots. He admired the alertness of the two sentries posted without fuss and well concealed on either side of the road. He approved strongly of the way each man clung to his rifle as he and Akhbar Shah passed by.

Towards midday they halted 'neath the shade of a rock, drank a little water from a gourd and ate one of the "chupaties"

they carried. Carr ate sparingly—a little “chupati” goes a long way. Like French bread, it has a tendency to expand after consumption.

Resuming their journey, they passed through the frowning gorge of Ali Musjid. Farther on, the pass broadened out. Here and there were oblong villages of mud, each with its round watch-tower and little groups of men, all armed, lounging in the doorways. They passed long strings of women going to draw water, dressed in red trousers with black cloths thrown over their heads. They veiled themselves as the travellers passed. Sometimes, a young girl would essay a peep at the strangers and be sharply admonished by some hideous old hag at the tail end of the file.

As they approached Landi Kotal, where they proposed passing the night at the caravanserai, Carr became more and more irritated with the brusque manner of Akhbar Shah. The Pathan had deliberately set a fast pace all day. He was obviously enjoying the white man's discomfiture.

Again and again he pushed on ahead, as if he were the master and Carr the servant.

It was evident to Carr that the time had come to bring home to Akhbar Shah his relative unimportance in the expedition. The dust, the heat, the soreness of his heel, all combined to infuriate him, until by the time they reached the caravanserai his anger was burning like a fusing electric wire.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ELOQUENCE OF AKHBAR SHAH

AT Landi Kotal the pass broadens out into a plain nearly a mile wide, intersected by deep nullahs. On this plain, around the mud fort, is a large military camp, surrounded by a trench and a wire entanglement. But it was not here that Carr and his companion went. Passing the camp on their right, they came to the caravanserai, a large enclosure, oblong in shape, surrounded by loopholed mud walls, beneath which are built mud hovels, used as shops and resting-places for the large floating population which passes to and fro between India and Afghanistan. This serai is the first halting-place of the caravans when they cross the frontier, which lies about four miles farther along the Khyber road.

Above the teeming life of the serai, perched upon a rock, is a brick blockhouse, which warns the wild Borderfolk to restrain their

wayward passions in the domain of the Sirkar.

A small guard of levies, armed with Martini-Henry rifles, with bandoliers of cartridges across their ample chests, jested and gossiped under the arch of the serai gate as Carr and Akhbar Shah came in. Several seemed acquainted with Akhbar Shah, for they gave him respectful greeting, which he curtly acknowledged. They eyed Carr with some suspicion but, from motives of their own, refrained from interfering. The prestige of Akhbar Shah was great among them. Had not he, single-handed, carried off the cow of 'Umr Ghul, and slain with a knife his brother who pursued him with a rifle? Was not he the man who, when offered scurvy hospitality by one Jan Badshah, had poured kerosene over his winter supply of grain and set it alight, killing his eldest son and uncle, who attempted to stop him, with a heavy lump of rock? Many were the rumours of Akhbar Shah's prowess. Decidedly, he was a man to be let alone.

But amongst the levies was a certain Nasir-Ud-Din, who bore Akhbar Shah a grudge of twenty years' standing.

Allah had delivered him into his hand !

All smiles and polite phrases, he approached the two travellers and begged Akhbar Shah to accept the hospitality of a mud hovel in the far corner of the serai, well away from the buildings occupied by the few wayfarers who were that night halting there.

Carr, for his part, was not sorry to secure the comparative seclusion of the hovel. Every minute he was becoming more convinced of the impossibility of his successfully passing as a Pathan. Whilst Akhbar Shah unsaddled the donkeys and placed their loads in the tiny mud shanty, he was tempted to abandon what seemed a foolhardy expedition, and take this last opportunity of resuming his identity as a white man. So far he had merely been compelled to stand in the background and remain silent whilst the Pathan conducted affairs—an arrangement which the domineering soul of Philip Carr found irritating in the extreme.

A smell of camel dung of ages offended his nostrils. A few dusty fowls pecked amongst the rubbish of the central square. From several hundred yards away came the sound

of the bugles in the camp. Several Baluchis lit a smoky fire of dried dung cakes, and cooked the evening meal.

Akhbar Shah entered with some "chupaties" and a mess of curry. The two ate in silence. Philip Carr's thoughts were bitter enough. What were the thoughts of the Pathan? His eyes certainly had lost the frankness they had had in the Kucha Ranjha in Amritsar. The meal over, Akhbar Shah flung himself upon his string bed and was soon asleep.

Night fell with a breathless stillness. There was no moon. The vague, appalling fear that came upon the first men in the primeval forests again returned to earth. The bugles in the camp were silent.

A Verrey light sent up from a perimeter post disclosed a waste of stones and the whitewashed, corrugated iron walls of some obscure latrine. Against the inky sky the rugged silhouette of the surrounding hills stood out like mountains on some distant planet that has never known the light of the sun. It seemed as if the Spirit of Man had perished æons and æons of centuries ago, and the planet Earth reeled far away into the

abyss. It was a night pregnant with futility and despair.

A dark form loomed in the doorway of the room in which Carr and his companion lay. Carr, who for some indefinable reason had not been able to sleep, like some wild animal startled in the jungle, sprang to his feet and, seizing a piece of rock which lay on the ground, struck it a mighty blow upon the head. The figure sank almost without a sound.

Akhbar Shah awoke on the instant and fumbled with the lamp. A pack of pariah dogs without snarled and fought over some carrion they had found. Within the serai all was silent.

In the fitful, yellow light of the lamp the two gazed upon the body of the intruder. A trickle of blood ran down across his temple and his mouth had fallen open. From his glassy eyes there was no doubt that he was dead. A long, sharp knife was still gripped in his right hand.

With diabolic joy, Akhbar Shah gazed upon his enemy, for it was the corpse of Nasir-Ud-Din, who had welcomed them the previous evening. "Now, O son of a

pig!" said he grimly, "I will so decorate thee that thou shalt find no welcome from the houris of Paradise," and drew a knife from beneath his shirt.

"This is my corpse, not thine," said Carr in a cold voice. Akhbar Shah noticed the revolver in his hand and the chill look in his eye. "Since when hast thou sunk to the mutilation of men thou hast not thyself slain? The corpse is mine, and mine to mutilate if I choose."

The heart of Akhbar Shah warmed towards Philip Carr. Here was a man after his own heart. Violent as he was in a moment of slaughter, so violent was he in his generosity.

"Sahib," said he, "thou hast saved my life to-night. It is thine to do with what thou wilt, even as it was Rosair Sahib's. May God glorify his face! It were fitting," said Akhbar Shah, "that we should cut off his hands and feet and fling them into the house of his father. But as time presses and thou art slow upon the hills, may I be permitted to suggest that we take the corpse and hide it in some far ravine? Do thou take the donkey's burdens and I will take the body, so that the levies in the morning

shall think that Nasir-Ud-Din is gone on some thieving expedition with us, and not to consort with the damned in Eblis."

The sentry of the levies on the far corner of the serai was sharpening his knife. He failed to notice two figures with burdens drop silently over the wall and crawl along a nullah that ran across the plain, their backs to the first wan rays of dawn.

Down by the caravanserai an ass brayed.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

“ OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY ”

OF the day that followed, Carr seldom liked to think. Over giddy heights and down gaping ravines they climbed under a scorching sun. Often he thought, as they ran up a hillside, that his heart would burst, or, as they flew down some precipitous incline, that he was hurling himself to destruction. No one is more swift and sure-footed upon the hills than a transborder Pathan, and few transborder Pathans could move as swiftly and as surely as Akhbar Shah.

Towards midday they relieved themselves of the body of Nasir-Ud-Din, already coated with flies, and, dividing the donkey's load, continued their mad journey. Carr noted that Akhbar Shah was avoiding all places of habitation and stuck to the more remote and

barren hills. When they approached a boy or a woman guarding a herd of goats, Akhbar Shah would make a wide detour.

But even to nightmares there is an end, and just before sunset they came to the deep cañon which the Kabul River enters after it leaves the plain of Ningrahar.

It was a lonely, barren spot. Not a man or a house was in sight, and here Akhbar Shah suggested that they should pass the night. Nothing loth, Carr cast down his burden and sprang into the racing waters of the river. Akhbar Shah followed him, for he knew that the current was swift. Then, much refreshed, the two came out of the river, and in that wonderful peace of mind and body which comes after hard exercise and a swim in cool water, ate their evening meal. The scene was one of all-pervading quiet. The hum of a city is often impressive; but the silence of the waste is awesome.

“ I would,” said Carr, reclining at ease upon a rock warm with the rays of the sun, “ that thou shouldst tell me all thou knowest of Rosair Sahib.”

So Akhbar Shah, looking towards the sun which was even then setting behind the snow-

white wall of the Safed Koh, began his story.

“ You must know, Sahib, that about the time when there was great talk in Hindustan of the Empress of the World who had died, and of the son who reigned in her stead, Rosair Sahib and I came into the country of the Amir. I know that you white people like not a story which is long and full of honeyed words, so I will be brief and tell only that which seems most wonderful in our adventures. I will not tell of the long days we languished in the jail of Jelalabad, nor of how we escaped by drugging the guards. To tell of our long wanderings without food would make your Honour drowsy long before I reached the main part of the tale.

“ But you must know that about the time when the grain was cut and stored beneath the floors, and the young men began to think once more of war and raids, Rosair Sahib and I came to my village of Barsak, which is some two days’ journey from the great waterfall, near the upper waters of the Kunar.

“ And Ali Akhbar, the Malik, who even now rules the valley (grown old in body,

but not in guile and stratagem), welcomed us as honoured guests, for he was thinking of beginning afresh his ancient quarrel with the Itman Khel, and wished to make use of the craftiness of the white men, which is the wonder of the mountain folk. Have they not from small beginnings brought all Hindustan beneath their sway ?

“ And Rosair Sahib advanced greatly in the favour of Ali Akhbar, Malik of Barsak in Kunar, and taking the box that he had brought with him, he made the djinn within speak in a voice that was never heard on this earth. ‘ Surely the unbeliever is in league with the powers of darkness,’ said Ali Akhbar in his heart. ‘ It were better that he should be destroyed, slowly and by fire.’ But Rosair Sahib, who could read even the innermost thoughts of a man, made the djinns within the box speak with many voices that turned the liver of the Malik to water, and said, ‘ O most mighty Malik ! with the army of djinns which are imprisoned in the box I will even drive off the cattle of thine enemies, the Itman Khel, and slay their young men.’

“ Now there was in the village at that time a certain Mela Ram, a Hindu, who had

come thither to escape punishment for some crime he had committed, and who made great profit by letting out money at interest, a practice which your Honour knows is forbidden to a true believer. This son of iniquity came privately to the Malik, and told him that the djinns of Rosair Sahib were all a sham. He said that such talking boxes as Rosair Sahib's could be bought for one hundred rupees in Bombay, and that there were many in Hindustan.

“Now the treachery of Mela Ram soon came to the ears of Rosair Sahib, and, going boldly before the Malik, he said, ‘O mighty Malik! since when hast thou listened to the wiles of the Hindu, than whom there is no greater liar out of Eblis! With ten of thy young men and my army of djinns will I even fall upon the Itman Khel, slay them and carry off their cattle.’ And going amongst the young men, who sat around the wall in the cool of the evening, he told them that with the aid of the djinns an attack upon the Itman Khel could not fail to succeed. That very night there was a great storm, so that there was utter darkness and great lightning. But Rosair Sahib,

gathering together the young men, said that this was the work of the djinns. In the midst of the storm they fell upon the village of the Itman Khel, who were taken by surprise. Many mighty deeds did Rosair Sahib do that night, and great was the weeping amongst the women of the Itman Khel at dawn, for there was scarce a man left alive. Great were the rejoicings in the house of Ali Akhbar, and in great honour was Rosair Sahib held. And Mela Ram, the Hindu, who had told the lie, was hurled from a mountain-top into a ravine, so that he died.

“ So Rosair Sahib advanced greatly in the favour of the Malik. Many a foray he led that winter, and great was the booty he took. Great indeed was the fame of Ali Akhbar, Malik of Barsak ; great indeed was that of the Rosair Sahib, or the Red Devil, as men came to call him. No mightier hunter ever chased the markhor than he ; none was more terrible in his rage or more smooth-spoken in his flattery.

“ But Rosair Sahib could never rest. He must always be seeing new countries and doing new things, so one night he went alone to the city of the dead and the valley which

glows by night, which lies beyond, places that no man may visit on pain of death, for there live djinns of such horror that no man may gaze upon them and keep his wits.

“ Now Rosair Sahib had taken to wife Zeba Khanum, the daughter of the Malik, and she poisoned her father’s mind so that he turned against him. For the fame of Rosair Sahib was greater than the Malik’s, and the young men were whispering amongst themselves, saying that he who leads the tribe in battle should also rule it in peace. Your Honour yourself knows that there was that in Rosair Sahib which made all men willingly obey him. So when Zeba Khanum told her father that Rosair Sahib had been to the city of the dead and the valley which glows by night, the Malik had him seized suddenly in his sleep and hurled into the great cave where lives the Sacred Lizard, who is older than Allah and his prophet. No man has ever been known to enter that cave and live ; and when next morning they came to see what had happened, they found the great stone rolled away from the opening and the Sacred Lizard blinking in the sun.

“ But of Rosair Sahib no more was heard

by any man of the tribe, until, on your Honour's veranda in Amritsar, I heard that he had taken from this world the honour of his presence.”

“ And what became of Zeba Khanum ? ” said Carr.

“ She poisoned herself the night they imprisoned him with the Lizard,” replied Akhbar Shah, “ leaving behind a daughter, by name Dil Afroz, who even now lives in the anderun of Ali Akhbar. Men say that she is of great beauty, but of such fiery temper that no man dares to ask her hand, thinking that she, too, is allied with the djinns. Great is her influence in the counsels of the Malik ; but few have ever seen her face. But, Sahib, I am no Bengali that loves to chatter all the night. May I be permitted to sleep ? ”

So turning over on his side, Akhbar Shah fell asleep ; but Carr lay awake upon the hill-side for a long time, gazing at the stars.

CHAPTER X

BARSAK

FOR fourteen days, Carr and the Pathan travelled northwards. Their way, for the most part, lay across unfrequented hills and ravines, for Akhbar Shah seemed anxious to avoid unwelcome encounters. Doubtless he had reasons of his own. Perhaps he was not anxious to meet any of his enemies whilst with Carr, for the enemies of Akhbar Shah were many, being even greater in number than his friends. Many were the men who owed Akhbar Shah a debt of blood: many were the tribesmen whose cattle he had driven off: many were the women who hated him, for, in a way, he was a breaker of hearts. Perhaps, too, he realised the difficulties that would arise should any of the Amir's officials discover the identity of Philip Carr. Akhbar Shah knew many of these, and liked not the breed, whether of the old school or the new. The

old with their refined Persian manners and snake-like subtlety he liked as little as the new with their European uniforms and manners borrowed from the Turk and the Russ. Akhbar Shah disliked authority because it was authority. He believed in liberty—not the liberty of Mr. John Stuart Mill. Liberty to him meant the right of Akhbar Shah to do as he pleased.

Towards noon, upon the fourteenth day, they came to the crest of a mountain range and looked upon a valley below, at the bottom of which ran a tiny stream. The valley was about three miles long and about a mile and a half wide. At either end it tapered into a narrow, dark ravine. Beneath the lee of the mountains on the far side, clustered about six Pathan houses, all built of mud and oblong in shape, with a round watch tower in the corner. Down by the stream, several fields of rice stood out a vivid, almost chemical green, in the midst of which the black cloaks and red trousers of women working could be seen. One compound seemed much more stoutly built than the rest and the bungalows inside it of a much more elaborate design. And, indeed, this

was to be expected, for it was the house of the Malik, Ali Akhbar.

Near by, a boy was guarding a herd of goats, which, like flies upon a wall, were grazing on the scanty herbage of the steep mountain side. The boy recognised Akhbar Shah from a distance, and came running towards him.

“It is not fitting,” said Akhbar Shah to Carr, “that we should enter the village like two wanderers, stained with travel and unannounced. Let us open the bundles and put on fresh clothing.” Then turning to the boy, he said, “Look here, thou brat, go quickly to the Malik and say to him, that Akhbar Shah is back from Hindustan, bringing with him a guest of such importance as he has not seen this twenty years, and that both, even now, are awaiting escort upon this hill, so that they may enter with fitting dignity.”

The boy sped off fast as a fleeing jackal down the hill.

Whilst they changed their garments, Carr pondered a little upon the attitude he should adopt when he encountered the Malik and how he should explain the purpose of his

coming. But his was an unusual nature. He ever preferred to act upon the Napoleonic principle of putting off the deployment of his forces as late as possible, and decided that it would be unnecessary for him to disclose at once the object of his venture. Indeed, he scarcely knew it himself.

Together they watched the boy enter the Malik's village. Soon afterwards, they noticed great activity within, and about ten minutes later, six men, all armed with rifles, came out of the village and advanced towards them. From four hundred yards distance they recognised Akhbar Shah, and rushed to greet him like impulsive children. Great was their joy at his return. Then, one by one, Akhbar Shah presented them to Carr, as a high court official presents persons of importance to a king.

Down the hill they went to the Malik's house. From every corner of the village, men rushed to greet them and seeing Carr preserved a respectful distance.

The Malik, Ali Akhbar, advanced to meet them at the gate. He was well advanced in years but still retained his upright carriage and air of command. Beneath great bushy

eyebrows, his eyes twinkling with vitality, expressed courage, craft and, perhaps, even humour. It was difficult to read the character of Ali Akhbar in his eyes: one came upon so many apparent contradictions. A long, white beard gave him a venerable air which would have become an Archbishop. In some inexplicable way, Ali Akhbar was a gentleman. Place him in a morning coat and a silk hat in the West End, and you would say "there goes a distinguished member of the House of Lords, or, perhaps, a retired Field-Marshal, or even a Judge."

Had Philip Carr been an emperor he could not have received a more courteous welcome. In an instant, the truculent Akhbar Shah became a suave ambassador and presented Carr to the Malik as a friend of Rosair Sahib, whom doubtless he had not forgotten. Not a muscle of the benign face of the Malik moved. In well-chosen Persian phrases, he welcomed Carr to his house, saying that a friend of a friend was his friend also, and placing his hand upon Carr's shoulder led him across the courtyard to a veranda in the shade. Deep red Bokharan rugs had here been spread, and the Malik with delightful

politeness requested Carr to be seated at his right hand. A pace in the rear Akhbar Shah sat down also in dignified silence. On the edge of the veranda, at a respectful distance, four or five other Pathans sat down, as if by right, for they were near relations of the Malik. One by one Ali Akhbar presented them to Carr.

Not a question was asked. Carr wondered whether this silence was exquisite politeness or had deeper motives. The conversation was formal in the extreme. To his surprise, Carr found that he could understand the Malik's Persian, so deliberately and clearly was it spoken. He had a shrewd idea that Ali Akhbar was anxious to show him what a cultivated person he was.

After an hour's interchange of banalities, which Carr found rapidly to pall, a servant arrived from somewhere behind the rush mats, which screened off the back apartments from view. Doubtless behind these mats lived the women of the Malik's house, for he had a queer feeling that eyes were watching him through the cracks. Soon appeared other servants bearing a great brass dish, piles of thick chupaties and a

samovar. In the brass dish was a "pilau" made of a whole sheep, cooked with rice and many spices. With charming courtesy the Malik requested Carr to partake of the food. Handing him a "chupati" he thrust his own hand into the mess of mutton and piled a great heap upon the cake of unleavened bread. To be treated in this wise is to be treated as a most highly honoured guest.

The Malik himself, his nearest of kin, and Akhbar Shah, helped themselves amply from the large brass dish. Then, for Carr, the ordeal began. At first, he found the "pilau" enjoyable, for he was hungry and had fed on the simplest of foods for many days. But no sooner had he eaten his share of "chupati" and "pilau" than he found another similarly piled up, placed courteously in his hand. There seemed no limit to the appetites of the Pathans; when Carr felt full to repletion they continued to eat with undiminished ardour. Anxious not to appear unmanly in their eyes, Carr continued to eat. Every mouthful was an effort. The sweat stood out upon his forehead. At length, unable to swallow any more he

remarked to the Malik that he had eaten just before descending the valley and, therefore, regretted he was unable to do justice to the most excellent "pilau" he had ever eaten in his life.

Then the samovar was brought forward and, from it, sickly sweet tea made with buffalo's milk was poured out into brass cups. Never was liquid more welcome to the tortured palate of Philip Carr. Finally, a servant brought round a brass bowl of warm water and a strip of coarse cotton cloth. In this, first Carr washed his hands, then the Malik, and then the other guests, all drying their hands upon the cloth.

Now Ali Akhbar was a considerate host. The meal over, he remarked that Carr must be tired from his long journey, and might like to rest in the heat of the day. Nothing loth, Carr was conducted by him to a little room off the courtyard. Here he found a string bed, on which was stretched a gaily designed violet "resai" or cotton quilt.

With delightful urbanity, the Malik left him.

Neither was sorry in his heart to secure a

little quiet. Both had much to think about, especially the Malik.

Carr had a queer feeling that he had been watched ever since he entered the house from behind the mats which screened off the women's apartments.

CHAPTER XI

LE PENSEUR

BUT there was no rest for the Malik, Ali Akhbar, that drowsy afternoon. For the first time for twenty years he was confronted with a situation which he felt beyond his powers.

So he went into the women's apartment to seek advice of his granddaughter, Dil Afroz.

An hour later he came out, deep in thought and sat down in his sleeping-room. For long, he watched a scorpion resting on the wall. Was his brain also becoming feeble like his body that he should seek the advice of a woman? Were there not countless stories of men who had come to their downfall in this wise? Was it not written: "Ask the advice of a woman and do the contrary?"

Still, Dil Afroz was different from other women. Had he not bred her so that he might produce a grandchild of wisdom?

When the Red Devil had come to the valley, he had been the first to recognise a man of courage and intelligence superior to his own, and being by instinct an eugenist had sought to secure these virtues for his descendants. He remembered how at the time he had imagined a grandson who should be as mighty a raider as himself and as quick-brained and crafty as the white people, who had made the millions of Hindustan their vassals. Surely, nothing could resist a grandson so wonderfully endowed in body and brain.

Dil Afroz was a woman and her advice therefore suspect. Ali Akhbar had had many wives, but though he was old in years and bitter experience, was not so foolish as to think that he understood women. It is only the adolescent, the raffish and the inexperienced who think they understand the subject. Yet she was wondrously plausible: her counsel appealed greatly to his love of devious ways and strictly practical ends, for Ali Akhbar was no philanthropist. He had, as they say in the West—"a keen eye to the main chance."

Perhaps the easiest way out of the difficulty

would be to hand Carr over at once to the nearest official of the Amir. But Dil Afroz had pointed out that the Amir's allowances had of late diminished and that the Sipah-salar when he had distributed the annual instalments last autumn had neither been civil nor generous. To hand Carr over would be to lose an opportunity which might not arise a second time. Ali Akhbar did not feel too cordial towards the Central Government.

Then there was the ever-pressing question of the Itman Khel, his hereditary enemies. Of late, they had become more aggressive; they were beginning to hold up their heads again now that the Red Devil was passing into a memory. They were whispering amongst themselves that Ali Akhbar was in his dotage and now sought peace rather than war. And Ali Akhbar knew that it is only he who seeks war who secures peace. Could not this new white man bring him stupendous victories as Rosair Sahib had done of old?

Ali Akhbar was a materialist. He approached every problem with the question: "What profit shall I obtain from this?" Could he not gain great advantages from the

wisdom of the white man? How often in the past twenty years had not the strong walls that Rosair Sahib had built him saved himself, his tribe and their cattle? He had heard wonderful stories of how, in Hindustan, the wisdom of the white people had abolished the famines that ravaged the country of old—how even in the summers when no rain fell, the fields remained green and produced good crops. Perhaps the new white man would show them how to make a good road, so that his heavy country carts could bring the annual tribute of grain speedily from the neighbouring valley. Perhaps he could build a bridge across the great ravine to the north, so that his “lashkar” could fall suddenly upon the Itman Khel and not take the difficult and exposed route across the hills.

Ali Akhbar was superstitious—but not so superstitious as he had been in his younger days. Though he had never been to the city of the dead, himself, or entered the valley which shone as if filled with dead fish in the moonlight, he was beginning to doubt a little the existence of the djinns. Perhaps there lay there untold wealth to whomsoever should be bold enough to enter it?

Still, materialist though he was, he never liked to think of Rosair Sahib. The very mention of his name made him shiver. Even if the Red Devil was dead, he felt he might at any moment ascend from Eblis and wreak his revenge.

For the moment, he would temporise and treat his guest with every courtesy. He would even talk with Akhbar Shah and find out what he could of this new white man and why he had come. He remembered grimly that it was with this same man of his own tribe, then a mere boy, that the Red Devil had come amongst them, twenty summers back.

When the red furnace of the sun sank behind the jagged outline of Khair Sappar, the Malik still sat in his room gazing at the scorpion upon the wall.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLINDFOLD LADY WITH THE SWORD AND SCALES

ALREADY the newly-risen sun flung great shafts of light across the crests of the hills to the east, upon the round watch-towers of Barsak ; already the women had come out of the posterns of the houses to toil all day in the fields of maize and rice, or gone forth upon the hills in long files to gather firewood ; already the fighting men sat outside the walls of their houses smoking a " huqqa " or, seated in little circles, passed the funnel-shaped clay pipe from hand to hand, when the Malik, blithe and hearty despite his years, came out to greet Philip Carr in the courtyard.

About fifteen men, who had been lounging under a lean-to shed beneath the wall, sprang to their feet and respectfully salaamed, Akhbar Shah amongst them. The morning greeting over, they sat down in a circle

around Akhbar Shah and listened to his stories with keen interest, cleaning the outside of their rifles the while. The Pathan loves to polish the outside of his rifle; he will spend hours at it; he seldom, however, cleans the barrel, his theory being that the next shot will do the work for him. Curiously enough, this neglect does not seem to affect the accuracy of his shooting in the least.

A small crowd had collected outside the postern gate. They were those who had a petition to make, a complaint against a neighbour or a suit to plead.

The Malik seated himself upon a rug under his veranda with a grunt, requesting Carr to do him the honour of sitting on his right hand. Then, in a deep voice, he commanded that the gate should be opened so that those who sought justice could come in.

Carr watched the crowd enter. They were typical simple mountain folk, frank and hardy, with a bold, free glance and an unaffected air. Just at that moment, however, he noticed the mat which covered the doorway of the women's apartment by his side,

bulge a little. A few strands of the mat were disturbed, and he felt, rather than saw, two eyes looking down upon him. He felt vaguely restive, but struggled hard to throw off the temptation to find out who was behind the screen and to take an interest in the Malik's administration of justice.

Two men stepped forward and made deep reverences to the Khan. Then one, a stalwart ruffian of middle age, with a deep-wrinkled face and wearing a filthy skull-cap, addressed the Malik: "O Khan! I have a complaint to make against this ruffian here," said he, pointing to the other man, a cheerful rogue with a face badly disfigured by the scars of smallpox. "The facts of the case are these. Last evening, nigh to the hour of sunset, I was driving my he-ass, loaded with 'bhoosa,' towards the village, when suddenly the ass took fright, flung off its load and bolted. This scoundrel, whom you see before you and against whom I now seek justice, appeared in the distance approaching the runaway ass. I shouted to him in a loud voice, 'Stop the ass! Stop the ass!' and he, taking a stone, flung it at the animal. The ass came to a standstill and I recaptured it, but found

that this abandoned one had blinded it in one eye with the stone that he had flung. Therefore, O most discerning judge, I seek the price of an ass from this scurvy knave."

Then, turning to the other man, the Malik ordered him, too, to state his case.

"O Khan!", said he, "the case is even as the complainant has said. But I ask you to remember that I threw the stone at his request, and had no intention of blinding the ass. It was not my hand, but the hand of Fate that guided the stone. O most learned Judge, I have committed no crime."

The Malik pondered a little. Then from the depths of his beard he pronounced judgment. "It is written in the most holy Quran," said he, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds retaliation." Then, turning to the defendant, he said, "Have you an ass?"

"Even so, my lord," replied the man.

The Malik stretched himself with satisfaction. Then to the complainant he said, "The case is easy. Do thou take a stone and blind his ass in one eye, even as he

blinded thine. I will send a man to see that this is done."

"Suleiman is come to life again," murmured Akhbar Shah to those around him. A burble of admiration arose from the crowd, but Carr distinctly heard a titter from behind the matting by his side.

A man stepped forward from the crowd and with a profound obeisance said, "The bunnia, Hardit Singh, an unbeliever, seeks audience of thee, O Khan!"

"Damnation!" exclaimed the Malik. "Cannot I be allowed one moment's peace from my private affairs to conduct the business of my people, whose happiness is ever my greatest care. Hang the dog up by the heels, so that he may reconsider his claim for interest upon the money I have borrowed from him to further the happiness of my people. Is not the letting out of money forbidden by the Sacred Law? But, come, I am weary of these tedious lawsuits. O Akhbar Shah, tell me some witty story that thou hast heard in Peshawar."

Akhbar Shah, nothing loth, came forward and sat down before the Malik. "O Malik!" said he, "this is a story I heard in Peshawar

city, and I doubt not that it is true. Hard by the Gate of the Elephants there dwelt a Yusufzai, Salamat Ullah by name. And he had a wife, whose name I have forgotten. One day, in a fit of annoyance, he took a knife and cut off her nose, but later, seeing how he had spoilt her beauty, repented of what he had done. So one evening he went to the house of the Wilayati Hakim (European doctor), whose wisdom and skill were the wonder of the city. And when the Hakim saw the woman, he said that the nose was beyond repair, but that in Wilayat he knew a man who made new noses of a kind of clay, which were almost as good as real ones. 'And what will be the cost of one of these noses?' said Salamat Ullah. The Hakim said that it would be at least one hundred rupees. Then said Salamat Ullah: 'O most learned Hakim! Put not yourself to this great trouble. I can get a new wife for sixty rupees.'"

Above the roars of laughter that greeted this story, Carr heard the sound of a little foot stamped hard upon the floor behind the matting.

There was a stir in the crowd below, and eventually a man came forward.

“O Khan!” said he to the Malik, “there is a most holy mullah without who craves audience.”

“Send him in,” exclaimed the Malik, now in right good-humour. “Let us hope he is as diverting as Akhbar Shah.”

He was, but not in the same way.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PERVERSITY OF DIL AFROZ

DIL AFROZ, granddaughter of the Malik Ali Akhbar, peeped through the matting which shut off the women's apartments from the outside world. The blinding light of the sun made the courtyard a sharply contrasted study in black and white. Since early morning she had watched the proceedings with intense curiosity. Particularly was she interested in the white stranger who had arrived the night before, for he was of her father's people—the white men who lived beyond the hills, the like of which she had never seen. She did not remember her father, Rosair Sahib, whose name the other women used as a bogey to frighten their children, and whom even the men mentioned with bated breath after sundown.

Though only nineteen, she was a woman, mature in body and mind. The other women

hated her for her exclusiveness, her contempt for marriage, the one topic amongst the girls in the anderun ; and, above all, they hated her for her influence over the Malik, old Ali Akhbar, her grandfather. Ali Akhbar regarded her with almost superstitious reverence rather than affection, for he recognised in her an intellect superior to his own. When he would fain temporise, she would advise bold action. She had the audacity of a rifle thief, the craftiness of a Hindu ; she had all the materialism of the Border and all the cruelty of the East. And yet there was about her that restful calm, which Man, the fighter, the lawbreaker, the destroyer of religions, can appreciate but never understand. In her presence even old Ali Akhbar, with the blood of hundreds of his enemies upon his hands, felt as a little child.

In the semi-darkness of the doorway of the anderun, she stood holding apart two strands of the matting so that she could watch the scene in the courtyard. The obscurity of the doorway made even more mysterious that greatest of all mysteries in the world—a beautiful and clever woman. The slender fingers alone which held the

matting were a wonder in themselves. Small and perfectly formed, with long, tapering fingers, her hand was in itself a world of mysterious delight. It was an aristocratic hand, a hand which seemed to express infinite capacity for appreciation of all the beauty, joy and sorrow of mankind. It was the hand of an artist.

Many were the young men of Ali Akhbar's house who, catching but a glimpse of her slim figure on its way with the other women to the well, had forthwith written little verses likening her to the gazelle, and then, overcome with disgust at their incapacity to express in words the fire that was in their hearts, had fallen to dreaming in the shade beneath the walls, forgetting utterly the lure of the hills, the mad joy of the blood feud, and the intoxication of the raid.

Pale was her complexion, with but the slightest suggestion of colour. And yet it had the purity of the snow upon the Safed Koh, that great white rampart that runs across the barren wildness of Afghanistan, an everlasting reminder to the traveller pushing slowly forward through the dust beneath the cruel rays of the sun, that there

is always an end to every journey, that no matter how bitter the day, there is always the cool and ease of the evening halt

Her hair, black and luxuriant, was carelessly held in bondage by a gold clasp of crude workmanship, unworthy of the task. Had the Hindu jeweller who made it, amidst the dust and flies of the Street of the Goldsmiths in Amritsar City, known who would eventually wear it, perhaps he might have fashioned a more lovely ornament. But for long years he had grown accustomed to judge jewellery merely by its weight and not for the beauty of its design. When the last rays of the setting sun made the Golden Temple seem an enchanted palace in another world, he would merely calculate in rupees the value of the gold leaf upon the dome. He came of an old people, old in civilisation, old in guile, deficient of the primitive enthusiasms of man, tired, blasé, cynical. He would never understand what that little gold trifle might have been.

Small was her face and as delicately chiselled as the shield of a Rajput chieftain. She had the high cheek-bones and slightly aquiline nose of her Afghan mother. And

yet, in her chin and mouth survived all the firmness and command of her father, John Rosières, softened and refined until all the cruelty had gone and only the divine quality remained. The beauty of the lily and the lotus is of this world; only the lilies and lotuses of Paradise could compare with the face of Dil Afroz, and they, even then being outshone, would blush with shame at the comparison.

Dil Afroz, of necessity, wore the costume of her people, but by some indefinable faculty was able to give it an air of dignity and restraint, that was yet alluring and mysterious. A white silk shirt, rather like a man's, clung closely round the perfect curves of her body, falling gracefully over the top of pink silk pyjamas. Dil Afroz loved those silk pyjamas. They were the memento of a victory, the first great tribute to her charm. Two years ago, Akhbar Shah, wandering upon the edge of the cantonment in Peshawar, had come upon the shop of a seller of silks, a Sikh, by name Umrit Singh. Casually he had noticed a roll of superfine pink silk amongst the other wares, and had politely asked the price. Rudely

the Sikh had said that such goods were beyond his means. Why, even the wife of a Colonel Sahib had that very morning, after covetously fondling the roll, decided that the price was too high! Akhbar Shah had at that moment exactly two annas on his person. Approaching the Sikh, he said, "I would give even more than the wife of the Colonel Sahib. I would give my life for the silk." And he struck the Sikh in the face. All the bazar rose as one man to catch Akhbar Shah. Never was there such a hue-and-cry. But still the fact remains that Akhbar Shah sold the roll three weeks later to Ali Akhbar for fifty rupees and a tin of kerosene.

When he bought the silk, Ali Akhbar had intended to give it to his youngest wife, Shurla Khanum. She saw it, and so also did Dil Afroz and the other six women in the Malik's anderun. No one quite knows how it came about. Not even Ali Akhbar could give a coherent account. Nevertheless the following evening Dil Afroz was in undisputed possession of the silk and the undying hatred of the other seven women.

Dil Afroz rose on tiptoe so that she might

better see the men without. The little red leather shoes, with upturned toes which encased her feet, slipped off in her eagerness, revealing a pair of tiny pink feet so high in the instep that a careful servant, with a pipkin of water, might have poured a stream beneath without wetting the arch.

Her never-resting eyes wandered from face to face among the crowd, then finally settled for several minutes upon Philip Carr. There are no words to describe the eyes of Dil Afroz. In them there was something of the ever-changing face of the Atlantic flood, when sometimes the sun comes out between the clouds and then is hid again. There was something of the sunlight which, at early dawn, glistens on the racing waters of the Kabul river ; something of the awful darkness which precedes a storm at the coming of the rains. They were infinitely cruel and yet infinitely kind, appallingly intimate and yet terribly elusive. At times they were the eyes of Circe the enchantress ; at others they were the eyes of a Madonna.

Now Dil Afroz, as she gazed through the matting into the courtyard, recognised the Mullah Fazal Elahi, when he entered. For

the past five years his name had been ever on the lips of the people from the Swat river to the Tochi. A wild, unkempt figure, he wandered from tribe to tribe with a few boxes of ammunition and a large stock of fiery doctrine, well calculated to fire the blood of the men of the Border. Dil Afroz knew him by sight, and even better by repute. He was probably sincere—she was prepared to admit that. She was also certain that mysterious, open-handed persons gave him large sums of money and occasional supplies of ammunition to stir up the religious feelings of the tribes and start numerous little “jehads.” Some said it was the Russ, some said it was , but Dil Afroz was not certain about this. For the moment she feared an outbreak of religious frenzy, which might bring harm to the white man, in whom she already felt considerable interest. She knew well how easily her grandfather’s people became inflamed with religious enthusiasm, for their ignorance of the faith is colossal. She watched with a vague uneasiness, tempered by a natural desire to see how the white man would carry himself in a mêlée. Perhaps it

was some ruse of their ancient enemies, the Itman Khel.

And yet, there seemed nothing suspicious in the manner of the Mullah as he entered the courtyard. He had the air of a very holy man. His white beard and dignified mien compelled attention and respect. Ali Akhbar welcomed him with great cordiality. Dil Afroz watched the tribesmen gather round him. She noticed how even the attention of the watchman on the tower was diverted from his proper task. The whole village seemed much intrigued by the arrival of the celebrity. She noticed too how not a muscle of the white man's face moved. Was this the impassivity of the panther watching its prey, or was it merely the sluggishness of the water buffalo ?

The Mullah commenced to harangue the crowd. To Dil Afroz's surprise he spoke not of war and slaughter. He seemed as meek as the doves which cluster round the well in the evening. She could distinctly hear him speaking. His words floated clearly up from the crowd below. At first she took little interest, merely noting with alarm that the watchman had ceased to keep a look-out

from the tower, and was absorbed in the Mullah's discourse. "What is there," he was saying, "that is purer than Islam? I speak not of that Faith which has fallen into evil days in Hindustan, where idolatry has crept in and the expense of the believer is great. Consider the religious duties. There are four: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca and alms. It is manifest that in the performance of prayer or fasting no expense is entailed. As for the Hajj, it is restricted by the verse of the Quran . . . he who can find his way to it. On attaining the age of puberty, for every man and woman marriage is enjoined as an absolute necessity. But in this, too, Islam has made no restriction of any kind. Of course, the bridegroom is ordered to give a banquet to celebrate the marriage, but this simply means that he should feed a few of his friends and kindred according to his means, so that the marriage may be made publicly known, and by eating and drinking together the tie of brotherhood may be tightened. Now, after marriage . . ."

Suddenly, all was confusion. Dil Afroz saw five men appear on the wall to the left

and commence firing into the crowd. At the same moment, thirty or forty men appeared on the opposite wall and rushed into the courtyard shouting fiendishly. She saw the Mullah leap forward with a knife upon the Malik and fall back dead, shot by the white man before he could deal a blow. Loud screams arose from the women's apartment. The Itman Khel had come for their revenge. Dil Afroz was rooted to the spot. All seemed over with Ali Akhbar and his house. Men rolled over in little heaps in the dust. The air was full of ear-splitting yells and screams. The confusion grew greater. Akhbar Shah and the white man, fighting fiercely, were driven to a corner of the veranda where, hard pressed, they shielded the Malik, gibbering with rage and impotence, for he was an old man.

Suddenly, the rush mat was torn down and Dil Afroz found herself clutched roughly by the waist and dragged bodily across the courtyard to the gate. The man who was carrying her off was a huge tribesman of the Itman Khel. His hands and arms were covered with blood. She pulled out a knife from beneath her garments and stabbed him

at the back of the neck, causing more blood to flow. He seized her by the hair and raised his right hand to strike her senseless. At the same moment, he fell like a slaughtered animal, a bullet through his head. Dil Afroz saw the white man standing over her.

But Philip Carr paused only a moment, to thrust Dil Afroz into a shed beneath the wall. Akhbar Shah beside him, he sprang upon the wall, and taking by surprise the five men who sat there firing into the crowd, shot two and pushed the remainder over the edge.

The effect on Ali Akhbar's men was instantaneous. Gaining fresh courage, they overwhelmed the enemy in the courtyard. Soon, except for a few men fighting desperately in a corner, the Lashkar of the Itman Khel had ceased to exist. The moans of the wounded and the dying filled the air. Old Ali Akhbar, a red knife in his hand, waddled round the courtyard, cutting the throats of such of his enemies as lay wounded on the ground.

Philip Carr, his clothing all torn, and blood flowing from numerous cuts, returned to the shed, where he had left Dil Afroz.

Unresisting he led her to the door of the women's apartments. Then, though faint with exhaustion, he said: "Maiden, such a woman as you who fears not to use the knife I would willingly wed."

Dil Afroz went purple with indignation and exclaimed: "You have seen me unveiled and would take a cur's advantage of it! May I never see your face again nor you mine!" With a stamp of the foot, she disappeared into the *anderun*.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HEAD OF ALEXANDER

TWO days passed amidst the weeping and wailing of the women, whose men had perished in the fight with the Itman Khel. A great gloom reigned over Barsak.

But towards the evening of the third day, when the bones of the departed had been laid in the already overcrowded graveyard down the valley, which bristled with slabs of slate and tattered standards, Ali Akhbar, ever an optimist, announced that there had been sorrow enough. Should not they rather rejoice that so many of their friends had died the only death fitting for a true believer and now made merry in the well-watered gardens of Paradise? So he called together his nearest of kin and his stoutest warriors to the veranda in his courtyard and bade them forget their sorrows.

They, nothing loth, came in force, led by

Akhbar Shah, who beyond the loss of an eyebrow seemed to have suffered not at all from the fighting. To Carr, seated as if by right, by the Malik's side, he seemed to radiate increased vitality. Great deference the tribesmen paid to Carr: already they realised that he understood them, that their joys were his joys and their sorrows his sorrows. Admittedly he had not the domineering air of Rosair Sahib, but still he was almost as mighty a warrior. Ali Akhbar too, dignified old Machiavellian though he was, had taken a strong liking to Philip Carr. He would have found it difficult to explain why. Perhaps it was because he seemed to understand the strange, fierce and yet noble heart of these wild men of the barren wastes of the earth.

A stout fellow with one eye and bandaged leg, commenced to strum upon a kind of guitar. Another made weird noises on a flute. A third, striking the open mouth of a pipkin with the calloused palm of his hand, produced a quaint monotonous rhythm. It was music strange to the ears of Philip Carr. And yet, fantastic though it was, it was music. It seemed to express the wind which

blows at midnight off the snows of the Hindu Kush in winter, the eerie calm of the sun-scorched hills on some summer noon. It was the spirit of the whirligigs of dust that reel across the desert : it seemed to be the thoughts of the great lizards as they lie basking in the sun.

Amidst shouts, Akhbar Shah sprang into the centre of the circle. First, in a high-pitched voice he sang of spring and the beauty of women ; the rest joined quietly in the queer but arresting refrain. But soon, he wearied of his theme, and raising his voice drew his great long knife from his belt. A fierce light lit up his eyes. He sang of the joy of battle and slaughter, of the brutal essential things which, even if deep down, lie in the heart of all men. With difficulty Carr picked out the words. The tune changed, but it was still a song of war. It seemed new to the audience, for they listened open-mouthed. Indeed, Akhbar Shah had learnt it from an Afridi in the caravanseri at Jamrud. It told of how the Sahib Log went to Chitral, it mimicked the whistle of the rifle bullets on the hills, it captured the echoes of the machine guns in

the ravines. Carr could see the lengthy column of sepoy, mountain guns and pack animals advancing slowly but remorselessly into the heart of a wild country. Round and round the knife in Akhbar Shah's hand whirled, right under the chins of the spectators, but not an eyebrow flinched.

Weary at last, Akhbar Shah flung himself down and a youth rose to take his place. This time it was a peaceful song, a song of the husbandman, a song of the ox-drawn plough.

Carr's thoughts wandered. Above the merry circle floated the face of a girl, with eyes as enigmatic and as calm as the great ocean.

The sun was setting behind Khair-Sappar. Boys slowly drove their herds of goats from the scanty pasture of the surrounding hills. The women came in from the well, great earthen pots of water upon their heads. Unwilling donkeys were tethered in the central square. It was the hour of evening prayer.

The circle broke up, some going to the housetops, others to the threshing floors without the village. There, as the last rays of the sun slanted over the beetling heights,

they bowed down before Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Carr suddenly felt terribly alone.

He looked up and before him stood a boy, a healthy, dirty young Pathan of about ten. The boy salaamed and without a word placed a coin in Carr's hand. Before he could say a word the boy had gone.

Puzzled, Carr gazed at the coin in his hand. It was a little bigger than a sixpence and covered with verdigris. He turned it over and over. It seemed to be of great age. There was a man's head on it, and the head of a clean-shaven man at that. Then it dawned upon him that it was the head of Alexander, the wonder of the world. It was a Graeco-Buddhist coin, a relic of Alexander's great conquest of Persia, Bactria and the Punjab. Such coins are common enough even to this day upon the Border.

Carr's thoughts drifted back some years. He was sitting again in the ancient desks of the classical sixth at school. In the midst of some pompous oration of Cicero, old "Ponto," his form master, had stopped at the words "Magnus illis Alexander." Again, he heard him, pince-nez on the tip of his

nose, declaim upon the greatness of the Conqueror of the World, whose memory for over two thousand years from the Thames to the Indus had never left men's minds. In the gathering darkness, the spirit of Alexander seemed to move again amongst the grim hills. "Alexander! Alexander!" the dust-laden breeze seemed to whisper down the valley.

Who was the giver of the coin and what did it mean?

CHAPTER XV

HEADS !

THAT night upon his narrow "charpai," Carr could not sleep. He tossed from side to side, finding ease in no position. The strings of the bed made great red marks upon his flesh. He perspired freely. Never had his mind been so restive : never had he felt such a disinclination towards slumber. Even in the height of the hot weather in the Punjab he had never felt that sleep was so far from him as now. It was a night unique in his experience, made ghastly, not so much by physical discomfort, as mental anxiety.

What was the meaning of the coin ? He had no doubt that Dil Afroz was the sender. But what in thunder did she mean ? Was it a coin thrown as if to an unwelcome beggar to make him go away ? Perhaps it meant that she rated him no higher than an obsolete piece of money long since out of currency.

At length, disgusted with his thoughts, loathing the bed on which he lay, he sat up and long remained seated dangling his legs over the side, his head between his hands. A few pariah dogs without found a piece of carrion and quarrelled and snarled over it. Carr looked up. Above, the great dome of the night sky hung sublime. But there was no inspiration therein for Philip Carr ; rather he felt his utter powerlessness against some inevitable doom.

It is the unknown, the mysterious, the inexplicable which is terrible. And yet, had he known the meaning of the message of Dil Afroz, he might have fled the valley that very night. But he was not to know the truth for many days.

At last, a faint, grey light glimmered behind the dark mountain barrier to the east. It was the dawn, the time when the spirit of man, having sunk to the depths, begins to rise again. It seemed ridiculously theatrical. It was not like the weary, hesitating sunrise he had so often awaited in the camp fields of Flanders, bitterly cold and hopeless, fighting against the conviction of the utter futility of all things human. Carr

could not help thinking of the time when, as a boy, he had attended a performance of "Henry V." He remembered distinctly how on the stage in the scene just before Agincourt, the sun had been made to rise at ten times its natural speed. This Oriental dawn was just like that. "Heaven help me!" said he, almost aloud, "I shall soon be comparing the flight of a hawk to that of an aeroplane. I shall be saying next that Dil Afroz has all the beauty of a Rolls-Royce engine."

The first rays of the newly-risen sun gilded the grotesque outlines of the eastern hills. Golden shafts of light glanced down upon the mud walls of Barsak. The houses commenced, as it were, to rustle with life. A cock crowed and then, stretching himself as he walked, strutted forward at the head of his zenana to rummage amongst the rubbish of the courtyard. There was a clattering of water pots somewhere within; the women were already awake. A he-ass suddenly commenced to bray. The sentry in the tower stretched himself and yawned.

Carr's eyes fell upon Akhbar Shah still sleeping upon a bed in the courtyard near by.

Suddenly, he saw him fling his arms above his head, then scratch himself, then rub his eyes.

“ O Akhbar Shah ! ” said Philip Carr, his spirits rising as rapidly as the sun, “ art thou a water buffalo that finds all its happiness in sleep ? Awake and come with me.”

Rather morosely, Akhbar Shah rose slowly from his bed and followed Philip Carr out of the postern gate. They had not gone a hundred yards, however, before Akhbar Shah stopped dead. “ Sahib,” said he, almost jocularly, “ there is a time for all things. A time for war and a time for rest, a time for prayer and a time for dalliance. Let us sit upon this rock which overhangs the well and enjoy the warm rays of the sun. Soon we shall see the women come forth to draw water at the well. It is a year since I was at home. I would fain see what new crop of beauty has matured in my absence.”

“ Surely, O foolish one ! ” said Carr, now in right good humour, “ you seek not to bring further disaster upon yourself ? Have you not enemies enough that you should now seek more, by gazing upon the women of another man’s house ? ”

“My back is broad,” replied the Pathan, “a few more enemies will make little difference. Besides, I hold not with the view of my people that a man should not see his bride until the marriage day. A woman with the scars of smallpox upon her face was once foisted upon me in that way.” He sighed pensively, “I gave a Martini-Henri carbine for her, a big price. Now I come to think of it, there was something wrong with the safety catch. It always puzzled me. It used to go off at odd moments when you were not expecting anything of the kind. There was a djinn in that rifle. My father-in-law was accidentally killed by it a week after the wedding. Who shall fight against Fate? Strange are the ways of Allah!”

Akhbar Shah smiled complacently, revelling in the invigorating warmth of the early morning sun.

Out of the postern gate of the Malik's house came the women to draw water from the well. Ahead, making no attempt to veil herself from the gaze of the inquisitive—the necessity had long since disappeared—stalked an old hag, lean and brown as a piece of leather, gaunt as a vulture that has

found no carrion for a long time. Behind her in single file, carefully covering themselves as they passed by Philip Carr and Akhbar Shah, came the younger women, the beauties of the Malik's household, amongst them Dil Afroz.

Philip Carr recognised her graceful figure at once. Immediately he was as alert as a man taking a shot at a buck at close range. For an instant she dropped from her face the wrapper of black cloth that covered her head and shoulders. Carr had a vision of two dark mysterious eyes, beneath long lashes, gazing earnestly into his. He gasped like a man suddenly falling into deep water. His heart began to thump. He felt that his face had suddenly become a flaming red.

A merry twinkle lit up the eyes of Akhbar Shah. He turned his head away.

At the tail of the file staggered an old woman, doubtless posted there to see that the younger women preserved the strictest decorum before the outside world.

Akhbar Shah recognised her as his sister, Getiara, who had wedded the Malik some forty summers back, when he was a tiny child. "O sister!" he shouted, "when

wilt thou give thy brother news? Stop when thou returnest from the well and fear not that thy charms will wither the heart of my young friend." The woman muttered assent and pushed on towards the well.

What a chattering there was around the well! "Squawking parrots," said Akhbar Shah, "and well I know it!" Carr paid no attention to his companion. He was watching carefully the little crowd of women. Yes . . . Dil Afroz was certainly talking quietly with the sister of Akhbar Shah.

Soon, their water pots filled, the women began to return from the well. This time Dil Afroz carefully kept herself veiled as she passed by. But the sister of Akhbar Shah hung back a little. She paused for one moment and said in a loud voice to her brother: "Brother, this is no time for talking. But remember that he who awaits by the well about moonrise often finds what he desires."

"And often more than he desires!" exclaimed Akhbar Shah, with a loud guffaw. He looked archly at Philip Carr.

His sister hurriedly rejoined the file of women. Beneath the gaze of Akhbar Shah,

Philip Carr struggled hard to preserve a calm exterior. Now was the time to act. This was the crisis. To meddle with the women of these people was to court inevitable disaster. Now or never he must withdraw.

In his dilemma he fingered the coin which had so mysteriously come into his hands the night before. A curious schoolboy impulse came over him. " Heads, I do, tails, I don't," he exclaimed aloud in English, and tossed the coin into the air.

The coin hung in the air for an instant, and then fell at the feet of Akhbar Shah. He gazed at it curiously as it lay on the ground, but did not touch it.

" There is the head of a man on this coin," said he carelessly. " Who is it ? "

CHAPTER XVI

MOONSHINE

TO accuse Akhbar Shah of lack of initiative would have been unjust. That very morning, after the big meal of the day which comes about eleven o'clock, he deliberately sought the society of Mamun Sharif, the watchman of the Malik's house. Mamun Sharif was rather under-sized and well advanced in years. His bad shooting was a byword in the village. Even the little boys, safely ensconced upon some rock that was difficult to climb, could make in safety sarcastic comments upon the war-like qualities of Mamun Sharif.

He was therefore highly flattered at first when such a "Bahadur" as Akhbar Shah seemed desirous of his company. As the conversation progressed, however, his enthusiasm cooled. Akhbar Shah in an airy way hinted that he realised how monotonous the life of a watchman must be; he

emphasised the benefits which long and distant travel confers upon a man; he suggested that Barsak was a bad place for fever and that a change of climate now and then was desirable. Mamun Sharif struggled to appear as obtuse as possible for a long time, but eventually, noticing a curious glint in the black eyes of Akhbar Shah, suddenly decided that he had urgent business in Jelalabad which necessitated his departure that very afternoon.

In the evening, a new watchman mounted the mud tower of the Malik Ali Akhbar's house. He was none other than Akhbar Shah.

Throughout the long, still hours of the afternoon heat, Philip Carr considered deeply the inadequacy of his knowledge of Persian. Curiously enough, his Munshi (instructor of languages), although a distinguished scholar and an able teacher, seemed to have taught him none of those essential, intimate little words and phrases which he felt his meeting with Dil Afroz would demand. Philip Carr had been in love before, but never so profoundly as at present. The odd part about the matter was that he had fallen into this affair of the heart without seeking it and

when his thoughts were farthest away from such things. He seemed to have two beings within himself struggling for the mastery. One, the practical, essentially intellectual self, said, "How damnably inconvenient! Just at the very time when I need a cool head and a hard heart, I am infected with this raging fever of the body and the brain!" The other self said little, but it was infinitely the stronger. It promised him the most fascinating and exciting of all adventures—the conquest of a woman's heart.

Carr, from beneath the shade of the Malik's veranda, gazed blankly at the waves of heat rising like ripples in deep water in the hot, still air of the courtyard. Towards sunset he sought out Akhbar Shah, who welcomed him with all the enthusiasm of a boy. "I have become watchman of the Malik's house," said he, in a voice that was almost insinuating. "There are many things which a watchman does not see."

Quickly the day came to a close. The lights disappeared one by one in the untidy houses of Barsak. Soon only the occasional coughs of the watchman broke the silence of the night.

When all was quiet, Philip Carr slipped noiselessly over the wall of Ali Akhbar's house and moved swiftly towards the little group of trees which clustered around the well. As he did so, the moon, all silver, lit up the eastern sky, flooding the valley with a soft light that was at once intimate and mysterious. Poets, from the beginning of time, have commented upon the way in which the moon changes the aspect of things. That which is stark pure fact in the light of the sun, seems to wear an entirely different look when the moon comes out. Verily, the morals of the world would be better were it not for the influence of the moon !

Philip Carr had not waited ten minutes in the profound shadow of the trees when he noticed a small, slim figure slip out of the postern gate of the house of Ali Akhbar. His heart seemed to be beating faster than it had ever done before. All the carefully chosen Persian sentences he had been preparing in his head flew clean away. He utterly forgot the riddle of the coin, which had obsessed his brain for the past twenty-four hours. He felt curiously awkward and embarrassed—he, Philip Carr, who had coolly

endured intense barrages on the battle-fields of France, who had sauntered through the Menin Gate at Ypres with a smile upon his lips. Indians without number had trembled at his frown. Philip Carr was embarrassed.

Down the pathway to the well came Dil Afroz. She seemed in no hurry ; she seemed confident that he would be there. In a voice deep and gentle she acknowledged his half-mumbled greeting. Of the two she was infinitely the more self-possessed.

With the perfect ease of manner of a lady of the highest rank, she sat down upon a stone beside the well. Her little feet peeped out, an almost unearthly white, from her tiny shoes. With an easy, almost casual sweep of the arm, she cast aside the wrapper which enveloped her face and gazed into the eyes of Philip Carr.

A vague sort of dizziness overcame him—a violent intoxication. With a stupendous effort he regained some of his self-control. Seated close beside her, he struggled to converse coherently. She answered him delightfully naïvely. Nay, did much to help him to collect his thoughts. But what they

talked of that night he never could remember. He scarcely dared look in her direction.

Suddenly, summoning up all his courage, he turned towards her. A little white face, unutterably alluring, gazed up into his own. He felt as if he were falling from a great height into a bottomless abyss. He kissed her long upon the lips.

On the top of the watch-tower Akhbar Shah coughed, but the sound was lost for ever, unheard in the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DAILY ROUND

FOR the following ten days Carr lived with greater enthusiasm than he had ever known before. He was vividly aware of new, previously unimagined, beauties in the rising and the setting of the sun ; he realised new meaning in the cool breeze which after nightfall swept down from the north. Never had he felt so intensely alive, so sensitive to all the wonders of the universe. He seemed to have acquired a new capacity for appreciation.

Thanks to Akhbar Shah, his meetings with Dil Afroz took place nightly without hindrance. Ali Akhbar, and even the women in his anderun, remained in complete ignorance of the relationship which was fast growing up between the girl and the young stranger from beyond the hills.

Beneath the leaden skies of our own country, a love affair is often slow in

maturing. But it is not so in the East. Skies of intense blue and moonlit nights produce an acceleration of the emotions that can only be described as extravagant. You will notice it particularly on a passenger boat going east, soon after you pass Port Said.

Ali Akhbar was astonished at the speed with which Carr acquired the idiom of his people. He little knew into whose able hands his instruction had passed. Carr was acquiring a language in the easiest and most exhilarating manner in the world. The methods of Ollendorf, Dr. Rosenthal and Berlitz have their points, but they are crude and unimaginative compared with that of Dil Afroz.

Every morning when the postern gates were opened and the daily crowd of tribesmen seeking justice swarmed into the courtyard, Carr would sit at the feet of Ali Akhbar, carefully listening to the evidence. It was obvious to him that the Malik had not a legal mind; it was patent that he always sought a practicable solution to every problem rather than a just one. There were times when Carr was strongly tempted to burst into roars of laughter. These sessions

had a great charm for him, for he was conscious that behind the matting overhanging the anderun door was a critic even more amused than himself. After nightfall, by the well, Dil Afroz and he would laugh together over the observations and decisions of the Malik. She had a keen, practical mind, quick to seize the essential features of a case, keenly alive to the ridiculous.

But before Ali Akhbar, Carr preserved an unfaltering attitude of deference. Frequently so tactful was he, that he left the Malik with the impression that a particularly brilliant solution to a difficulty had emanated entirely from the Malik's own brain. Herein lies the secret of many a successful Grand Vizier.

One morning, all the complaints were disposed of with more than usual rapidity. Ali Akhbar stretched himself with satisfaction, almost, as it were, wallowing in his own self-esteem. "To few so young in years," said he to Carr complacently, "is such wisdom as thine given, or such deference to the sagacity of age. But I am weary of this wrangling. Let us amuse ourselves. Let us have some 'shikar.' "

Now, to Philip Carr, if there was a magic word, it was "shikar." It made his heart leap with joy. It made him want to whistle and sing, and when the Malik suggested that they should shoot quail, he assented with such eagerness that Ali Akhbar raised his eyebrows with astonishment.

From within the house, a servant appeared, bearing two "jezails," both at least seven feet long, with muzzles the shape of the mouth of a rubber hot-water bottle, and flint locks. The butts were short and fantastically shaped. The servant, with a long ramrod, crammed a charge of powder and a wad into each, then meticulously dropped about an ounce of pieces of lead of various sizes and shapes down the barrels. He then announced that all was ready.

Philip Carr's enthusiasm cooled. The prospect of any sport with such weapons as these seemed remote. The prospect of carrying these stupendous pieces of hand artillery across the hills did not appeal to him.

They were not long, however, in reaching the hunting ground. In fact, it lay just outside the postern gate, on the shady side of the village. Ali Akhbar sat down with a

grunt, his back to the wall. A stout tribesman obligingly built up a little rampart of stones in front of him on which to rest his "jezail." The same was done for Philip Carr. Then the "battue" commenced.

A servant released a quail from the bag which he was carrying, almost under the noses of the sportsmen. Dazzled by the unaccustomed sunlight, the bird fluttered blindly before them. Wouff! There was an explosion like 18-pounder shrapnel. A cloud of blue smoke rose to heaven, and the Malik sat complacently watching the shockingly mutilated corpse of a quail not ten yards away.

This went on until all the birds brought out by the servant had been done to death. Ali Akhbar was obviously delighted with his prowess. Carr found it difficult to conceal his indignation at the Malik's notions of sport.

Later in the day he conveyed his distaste for this form of amusement to Akhbar Shah, and tried hard to explain his own opinions on the subject. Akhbar Shah listened patiently, pretending to understand. He got the idea that Philip Carr liked shooting

combined with exercise. He remembered once having talked with a Pathan havildar in an infantry regiment who had at one time attended a musketry school. The havildar had talked volubly on the principle of the white man of "fire and movement." This idea of sport of Philip Carr's must be the same thing.

So, the following day, Akhbar Shah suggested that they should go out and shoot "chikor" upon the hills. Carr gladly assented. But Akhbar Shah stalked the birds as if he were shooting deer, and shot them sitting from the closest possible range. No amount of argument on Philip Carr's part would convince him that a sane man would go shooting in any other way. Carr's notions, apart from other drawbacks, seemed to him far too extravagant in powder and shot alone to be feasible. And never, to the end of their queer relationship, could Carr persuade him otherwise.

Now a night came when the moon rose late, scarce two hours before dawn, and then hung withered and faint in the western sky. Carr found Dil Afroz a little pensive, a little less volatile than usual: her spirit seemed

more elusive, more baffling than it had ever been before. More than ever he felt his complete subjection to her charm.

Then it was he asked her the meaning of the coin she had sent him. It seemed many ages ago now. "The time is not yet come for you to know that," said she, dropping her long eyelashes. "But I have a feeling that it draws near. For three nights you shall not see me. And on the fourth we will meet again and you shall see what you shall see. To-morrow night you shall go about this hour to the City of the Dead, where only in the memory of men my father, Rosair Sahib, has dared to go. And you shall tell me whether, in truth, there are djinns amongst the ruins, and many other things besides, if you have the courage."

She kissed him softly on the lips, and was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIRST PILGRIMAGE OF PHILIP CARR

ON the following night, three hours after sunset, Philip Carr slipped quietly over the walls of Ali Akhbar's house and moved swiftly down the valley in a northerly direction. Akhbar Shah, seated upon the platform of the watch-tower, saw him go. At first he thought that Philip Carr was merely going towards his nightly rendezvous at the well, but when, in spite of the darkness of the night—for he had eyesight of keenness greater than ever given to a white man—he saw him disappear in the opposite direction, he raised his one remaining eyebrow and gazed inscrutably at the surrounding hills. "Even he is mad like all his people," thought Akhbar Shah. "To understand a white man is not given to us hill-folk." And for some inexplicable reason Akhbar Shah sighed.

As he strode swiftly down the valley, Carr

felt ill at ease. His heart was heavy, in that he had to wait three more nights before he could again see Dil Afroz. He realised that she was becoming an absolute necessity to him. He could not imagine happiness which he could not share with her.

The night was ominously dark. On the lightest of nights, to move about alone among the hills tries the nerves of the most phlegmatic of men. Only the lover or the evildoer quits the loopholed walls of his village after sundown. Night is peculiarly the time for intrigue and dark deeds.

The opaque masses of the hills on either side loomed menacingly above the valley. The loose dust of the pathway felt ice-cold beneath the leather of his "chuplies" and his bare feet. He struck the bare big toe of his right foot hard against a stone. An exclamation of anger escaped his lips. The hills on either side uncannily gave back the echo. Carr felt ill at ease; vague fears struggled to take possession of his mind. It was with an effort that he stifled the desire to turn his head and make sure that he was not being pursued by something to which he could not give a name.

Carr had scarcely gone three miles when he came to a point where the path turned sharply to the right, just by the mouth of a great nullah. He paused for one moment. The path, he remembered Akhbar Shah had once told him, went on to the village of the Itman Khel. This nullah must be the way John Rosières had taken, years ago, to reach the City of the Dead. Though hot as the result of the speed with which he had come, Carr shivered. Then, all resolution, he sprang into the darkness of the nullah.

The way was not easy. Great rocks, rolled down by the violence of rushing waters in past rainy seasons, barred his way. Some were as smooth as polished marble. Others had sharp edges which tore his flesh and clothes, as if they were endowed with some fierce hatred against him. He sprang lightly from rock to rock.

At length, breathless with fatigue and excitement, he reached the top, and gazed upon a plateau which seemed to stretch away into the darkness. Just at that moment, the aged moon peeped over the hills behind him, lighting up the scene with a wan and sickly light.

It was an uncanny sight that met his eyes. All around lay masses of obviously hewn stone. Close to him, a shattered "stupa" (Buddhist tomb), conical in shape, frowned down into the darkness of the nullah from which he had emerged. All around were the ruins of what had once been great buildings. Here were the remains of what had, long ages ago, been broad streets, laid out upon a well-defined and symmetrical plan. Fascinated, Carr pushed on.

On each side were the ruins of tiled courtyards. Here was an overturned altar ; there, a tiled bath. Fallen pillars lay across the streets. Broken amphoræ and pottery cluttered the streets.

With a start, Carr noticed a statue of a woman, still standing. It was undoubtedly Greek, and yet it lacked the Grecian grace. There was something wrong with the statue. The woman seemed too short, too heavy of build. Her expression seemed out of harmony with the Greek ideal—it was too passive, too Oriental. Near by, a bas-relief flanked the way. It represented a Greek soldier in full armour standing by an image of Buddha, but not the Buddha of

the East. The expression seemed all wrong. It was almost flippant: it had a frivolous and worldly air.

That the plateau had in past ages been much less arid there was no doubt. Here, Alexander's soldiers, tired after long wars, must have brought their Eastern brides and built this city, vaguely remembering the splendours of their native land. Long ago, the plateau must have laughed with green verdure and the hill-sides pastured great flocks of sheep and goats.

Carr looked up. Above the ruined city frowned an enormous rock, accessible only on one side. A winding stairway had been cut out of the solid face. His curiosity overcoming the vague misgivings in his heart, Carr climbed up, to find himself in an enormous temple, built doubtless also as a citadel. All around, beneath great porticos, were hundreds of images of Buddha, great frescoes of clumsy hippopotami. Uneasy, Carr pushed on into the heart of the temple and entered an empty courtyard. Day was just breaking. Before him stood a great stone image of Buddha, larger than all the rest. With a start, Carr gazed upon the

figure. A tremor of horror passed over him. The image seemed to smile. It was cynical : it was cruel ; it was revolting.

Was this the result of the incestuous union of the West and the East ? Was this an awful warning that there are barriers which must not be broken down ?

A hundred feet below, a tiny cloud of dust, caught in an eddy of the air, reeled across the ruins of the city like an evil spirit.

With a stupendous effort Carr stifled his wandering fancies and calmly walked down the steps of the citadel, through the streets of the dead city, to where the dark nullah mouth gaped in the face of the rising dawn.

By the time he reached the village of Ali Akhbar he was thinking of nothing but the eyes of Dil Afroz, of the little gold flecks of light that danced therein as it were in deep waters. He revelled in the warmth of the early morning sun.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MALIK MOVES

THAT morning Ali Akhbar, the Malik, waited long on his veranda for Philip Carr. He had important news to convey to him. Moreover, he was rapidly beginning to value his advice in the thousand and one tedious problems which were daily brought to him to solve. But the young white man did not appear. As a matter of fact, he was lying fast asleep upon his bed, exhausted by the fatigue of the previous night's excursion. Ali Akhbar did not like to inquire about his health and whereabouts, lest all the world should realise how much he was beginning to depend upon the white man's judgment.

Although inwardly boiling with irritation, the Malik feigned indifference to the business of the day. With a wave of the hand, he ordered the courtyard to be cleared. The young men of his household rather forcibly

conveyed to those seeking justice that their presence was irksome to the Malik. No one dared to ask why there would be no dispensation of justice that day. It was sufficient to them that the Malik was out of humour.

Allah Ditta, the Malik's personal servant, watched his master with anxiety. He scented a violent outburst of wrath in the near future, and was acutely aware of the fact that when it came he would be the victim. Now, Allah Ditta from long and exceedingly bitter experience, knew how to mollify the Malik. He carefully sought out Ali Akhbar's favourite "huqqa," filled the beautifully chased bowl, or "chilam," with the best tobacco he could find and smouldering charcoal; with infinite patience he ensured that the pipe would draw, and then, finally, without being told, unobtrusively placed it before his master.

Ali Akhbar savagely gripped the mouth-piece between his teeth and took a deep draught of smoke. He glared at Allah Ditta, who inwardly trembled. "Excellency," said he, with a profound obeisance, "there are some fine water melons within."

Now Ali Akhbar was partial to water

melons. He loved them more than any other fruit. And there are no finer water melons in the world than those which come from the hills of Afghanistan. Baber, the first and the most attractive of the great Moguls, amidst the splendours of his Imperial Palace in Delhi, often longed for the cool, sweet water melons of his birthplace in the hills of far Ferghana. And Ali Akhbar shared the taste of the most human of all the emperors.

The skin of Allah Ditta was for the moment saved. The fire died down in the Malik's eyes. He ordered the fruit to be produced at once.

A person of refinement watching Ali Akhbar eating water melons would have been inclined to caustic criticism. He was decidedly an unpleasant sight. The juice ran down his beard on to his pyjamas. He was indiscriminate in his method of disposing of the pips. Still, those to whom the spectacle of human happiness is in itself pleasing would have enjoyed the sight.

Allah Ditta watched the success of his diplomacy with satisfaction from a corner of the courtyard. The danger of an explosion

of wrath was averted. Every moment the expression on the Malik's face became more and more good-humoured.

At length, replete with fruit, the Malik leaned back and surveyed the courtyard with a contented air. He drew a deep draught from his "huqqa" and complacently smiled.

He clapped his hands. Allah Ditta was beside him in a moment. "Present my respects to the young white stranger," said he. The servant hastened to obey the order.

Philip Carr, although freshly aroused from sleep, was not slow in coming. In his spotlessly white cotton shirt, hanging over baggy pyjamas, with a great silk pagri upon his head, he was an impressive figure. A short, curved knife in a silver case, beautifully engraved with an intricate Persian design, hung at his waist. His automatic pistol was slung across his shoulder by means of a bandolier, in which were fixed about forty rounds of ammunition, of which the copper cases glowed warmly in the sunlight of the courtyard.

"Greeting, O Khan!" said he, politely saluting the Malik. Ali Akhbar affably

motioned him to be seated by his side on the thick pile of rich crimson Bokharan carpet which was spread upon the veranda.

The "huqqa," the feast of melons in which he had indulged, and freedom from the worry of affairs, all combined to make the Malik in a genial mood. He was in no hurry to broach the subject which for the past few days had been foremost in his mind. His sense of good manners and the fitness of things prevented him from making an abrupt statement of his wishes. Nay, rather, in the manner of the well-bred Oriental, he preferred to lead up gradually and with dignity to the object of the interview.

First he confined himself to generalities and polite phrases. "Tell me, young stranger," said he, "of the marriage customs of thy people. The rumour is that they are wondrous strange."

As well as he could, Carr outlined the means by which a suitor for the hand of a girl in England gains his heart's desire. The Malik was genuinely shocked. His sense of propriety was outraged. He was obviously astounded at the laxity of the white people.

That the woman should have any say in the matter he considered absurd.

Carr told him that few men amongst his own people ever married before they were thirty years of age. Ali Akhbar raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "Great must be the impiety of thy people in the eyes of the Most High," he exclaimed, "that they marry not until half the years of their manhood are wasted. Alas! that a people so wise in war and council should be so blind to the teaching of the Prophet! Thou tellest me that though thou art a man of twenty-five, thou hast not yet a woman of thine own. I had a son ere I reached my sixteenth birthday. Alas! he died at the hands of the Itman Khel. Tenfold have I paid the debt of blood."

A wave of softness passed over the deeply-wrinkled face of the Malik.

He was silent for a few moments. Then, striking Carr cheerily upon the shoulder with his right hand, he said: "It is high time thou tookest on the wedded state." Carr was all attention.

"In my anderun," went on the Malik, "is the very mate for thee. At any rate, she

will be a good beginning for thy household. Doubtless, later you will require other wives, but, for such a novice as thou art in these matters, thou might begin much worse. Half her blood is the blood of thine own people. Thou hast known her father, Rosair Sahib, who was of thine own race and a mighty warrior. But I care not to speak of him. Take the maiden and willingly. Seven asses and a water-buffalo shall be her dowry. I ask nothing of thee, for thou art in thyself pleasing to my people."

Philip Carr's heart leapt with joy. He could scarcely thank the Malik in his enthusiasm. Ali Akhbar, too, was delighted at the prompt acceptance of his offer. Truth to tell, he looked forward to a period of peace in his anderun. He was weary of the constant quarrelling of the other women on account of the favour he showed Dil Afroz. He inwardly rejoiced at the happy solution he had found of an ever present difficulty, but he was careful not to say so to Philip Carr.

Had Ali Akhbar realised that Dil Afroz and Philip Carr were not unacquainted with each other, his attitude would have been

altogether different. He would probably have flown into an overpowering rage only to be appeased by blood. But thanks to Akhbar Shah, he was unaware of the nightly meetings by the well and, moreover, remained in complete ignorance of them to the end of his days.

About the time of the mid-morning meal they parted. Never in the history of the tribe had there been such showers of effusive compliments. Carr was astounded at his own eloquence.

Joyful beyond measure, Carr entered his room and sat down upon the bed. And here he sat for five hours, absorbed in happy thoughts. He utterly forgot to eat his mid-day meal. One little doubt alone perplexed his mind. Was this the meaning of the sending of the coin? Was this "that which is most to be desired in all the world"?

CHAPTER XX

THE SECOND PILGRIMAGE OF PHILIP CARR

THE third day dawned with its accustomed splendour. As the first rays of the sun shone down into the courtyard of the house of Ali Akhbar, Philip Carr opened his eyes, and feeling none of that lethargy which under an Eastern sky makes the sleeper unwilling to leave his couch, sprang blithely from his bed. Forthwith he hurried out of the postern gate to the well, so that he should not be forestalled by the daily water party from the Malik's anderun. Sliding a coarse rope between his fingers, he lowered a kerosene tin into the dark waters of the well and, drawing it up again, soon completed his ablutions.

The village was not yet fully roused from sleep. Carr, for some vague reason, felt delighted at this. He revelled in the intense self-esteem of the early riser and burst into song. Akhbar Shah, still drowsy upon the

platform of the watch-tower, was given an impromptu rendering of "Rolling down to Rio." Then from the direction of the well came the rollicking strains of "Madelon," the tune to which the allied armies marched towards the Rhine in the great days of 1918. Unfortunately the music was wasted on Akhbar Shah. He thought the white man's music all out of tune compared with the bizarre, almost falsetto, refrains of his own people. Moreover, being over forty years of age, Akhbar Shah seldom now felt the impulse towards song in the early morning.

And yet the joyousness must have been the effect of love on a young and exuberantly healthy young man. He felt convinced of his success in the most exhilarating adventure of his life. He felt the impulse towards action. Dil Afroz had bade him go to the City of the Dead. He had been. Had not Akhbar Shah once mentioned a valley which lay beyond? Surely, if his memory did not play him false, there had been some suggestion of it in the diary of John Rosières?

Scarcely had the thought welled to the surface of his mind than he was speeding with rapid strides down the valley towards

the north. Forgetful of the possibility of his being cut off and done to death by some stray "lashkar" of the Itman Khel, he whistled on his way. Little grey lizards blinked at him amongst the stones; a great yellow iguana, about a yard long, stared at him from the walled edge of a terraced field. Occasionally small brown butterflies fluttered across his pathway, seeking food amidst the scanty herbage of the valley.

He soon reached the nullah which branched off towards the City of the Dead. A wild rush from rock to rock brought him to the top. For a moment he paused to take breath by the shattered "stupa." In the morning sunlight the ruined city had none of the weird air which it had worn in the light of the moon. Carr passed through it with scarce a tremor.

Across the arid plateau sped Philip Carr. Not a sign of life met his gaze. Not even a carrion bird relieved the immaculate blue of the sky. Every moment the rays of the sun increased in power. Gradually the pace of the traveller decreased. Philip Carr began to feel the first signs of fatigue, and searched round for shelter from the sun.

Soon he came to a spot where the gaunt side of an enormous hill seemed as if cleft in two by some cataclysm of past ages. One side, absolutely perpendicular, cast a deep shadow across the gap. Here was the shade he desired, and Philip Carr flung himself down on to a patch of soft sand.

Truly, after the glare of an Oriental sun, nothing is so welcome as shade. Carr stretched himself upon the sand, scarcely taking note of his surroundings, scarcely troubling to think. Only he who has carried out long marches on foot beneath a scorching sun can imagine the beatitude of Philip Carr.

Idly he fell to dreaming of the elusive beauty of Dil Afroz, playing with his automatic the while. It was a great friend to Philip Carr, that automatic. He had endowed it with a soul. Ages ago, it seemed, he had taken it from the hands of a fat German "feldwebel" in the shattered streets of a French village. On the holder it said, "Ludwig Mathias, Frankfurt a/M., 1916." Carr was indulging in one of the oldest forms of worship of mankind—the worship of arms. It lies deep down in the heart of every man,

however civilised. You will find it in a suburban village ; you will find it amongst the Ghurkhas, who at the feast of " Dusehra " pile their " kukries " in a heap and sit round them in a circle.

And associated with it, too, you will find the worship of women. There seems to be a close relation between the two. In the profound quiet of that Afghan morning, Carr played with his automatic and thought of Dil Afroz.

Carelessly he picked up a stone which lay at his feet. It seemed to glitter : it was certainly heavy and streaked with yellowish veins. It was a gold nugget. Carr remembered having seen one before in the glass cases in the library at school. He looked around. The whole valley, which ran deep into the hill-side and was lost behind a bend scarcely a hundred yards away, was littered with similar stones.

This, then, was the mystery of the valley. This must be the place of which Akhbar Shah had spoken. Doubtless, the greyish sand upon which he was lying was some radio-active ore, which caused the valley's luminosity by night.

Here was the means of bringing the world to his feet. With this, he could consort with Kings. All the beauty, all the luxury, all the power in the world were within his grasp. He need no more suffer the cold of winter nor the summer heat, the agony of the dust nor the torture of the rain. He could become the greatest of the conquerors. All culture, all refinement, all intellect would lie at his command.

Great was the simplicity of Philip Carr. He was unimpressed. His exaltation would mean the destruction of Ali Akhbar's people. It would bring them into contact with all that is evil in the West. They were children: they had hope. Carr felt that his own world had nothing to offer them. He had a vision of their losing their primitive virtues, their primitive joy in living.

Disgusted at the prospect, he flung the nugget from him and, springing to his feet, set out on his journey home.

Passing the City of the Dead, he had an impulse to enter the citadel. Up the staircase he climbed, entered the temple and passed beneath the porticos, into the courtyard where stood the great image of Buddha

—the image which two nights before had inspired him with a vague horror.

In the scorching noonday sun the god seemed to have lost its expression of cynical despair. It seemed all-understanding, all-forgiving, infinitely benevolent.

A question fluttered to his lips. "What, O Buddha!" said he, half aloud, "is that which is most to be desired in all the world?"

From within himself came the answer: "It is written in the eyes of Dil Afroz."

He turned and, standing at the gateway of the citadel gazed long at the blue spirals of smoke rising in the still air above Barsak, three miles away.

CHAPTER XXI

EXPLOSION

NIGHT had come. Already the delicate silver bow of the new moon had risen and set in the eastern sky when Philip Carr reached the deep shadow of the trees around the well. Despite the intense darkness and the silence, a great calm joy filled his heart. To-night he would ask Dil Afroz to be his wife. Henceforward, with her, he would lead the happy primitive life of Ali Akhbar's people. No more would he wander over the earth, with no hearthstone to call his own. Here he and his descendants would live free from the slavery of civilisation, against which he had been in rebellion since early manhood. All seemed easy. All had gone well. Had he not wooed the girl after the manner of his own race? Nay, more, her grandfather was obviously all eagerness to give her to him according to the immemorial custom of the East.

Keenly expectant, he gazed towards the dark mass of Ali Akhbar's house. A faint light glimmered through the matting which covered the door of the anderun.

Suddenly, there was a sound of smashing pottery. A feminine scream cut the night air, followed by a shower of curses in a deep masculine voice. Carr knew it for the voice of Ali Akhbar.

Then, with a sudden wrench from within, down came the matting which overhung the door. A light from inside half lit up the courtyard. A slim feminine figure rushed across the patch of light and sprang upon the wall. At the same moment the bulky figure of the Malik darkened the doorway, spluttering with rage. He waddled towards the edge of the veranda and then suddenly tripped over a water pot, which had been carelessly left there by Allah Ditta just before sunset.

A tornado of curses burst from the enraged Malik as he lay there unable to rise, so beside himself was he with anger—anger at the perversity of his granddaughter, anger raised to boiling point by his fall, anger made all the more uncontrollable by his advanced years.

“ Bitch ! Daughter of Iniquity ! Devil ! ” screeched Ali Akhbar, tearing his snow-white beard. “ Get thee gone ! May all the devils carry thee to Eblis ! ” He was gibbering with rage like a captured ape.

Dil Afroz sprang lightly down from the wall, and sped swiftly down the path right into the arms of Philip Carr, who, all amazed, was at a loss for words. For an instant she panted, shaken by emotion. Then she pushed him violently from her.

“ Barter me along with seven asses and a buffalo to a chance stranger ! ” she cried. “ Am I no more than the cow-like women in the anderun—first a pretty toy and then a slave to a man ? Am I to pass my days in bearing children, making ‘ chupaties ’ every morn and night for a man to eat, and when all my beauty has gone from me to carry great bundles of firewood from the hills to some filthy hovel of sun-dried mud, which I shall call my home ? ”

She paused for a moment. So intense was her passion that she could not find words adequately strong to give form to the emotion deep down in her heart.

“ No,” she said, a little more calmly,

raising her eyes to those of Philip Carr. "I would not be that to a Man." Her little hand sought his shoulder and clung tenderly there. "Pheeleep, I would be something greater than that to you. I would raise you out of all the sordid emptiness of this valley. I would be to you a thing for which you would dare all, for which you would fling away, if need be, your hopes of Paradise. I would have you great among men—so great that your name would flutter from lip to lip in every caravanserai; so great that the Faithful, rushing to their doom in some mad affray, would call on thee rather than on Allah!

"In Hindustan, they say, is the loveliest palace in all the world—the tomb that in Agra City the Emperor Jehangir built for his lady, Arjamand Benu Begam. I would have you feel to me all the deep emotion that he tried to express in stone. And, they tell me, it is a wondrous palace, a dream that has come true."

A wave of tenderness passed over her. "Pheeleep," she murmured, "perhaps it is the restless soul of my father which makes me speak thus. But you are of my father's people and will understand. And perhaps it is not only because you are of his people

and fought by his side in many a foray that I would have you thus.

"I know you are brave, even as are all our young men. But I would that you were more than a daring leader of petty raids and tribal bickerings. I would that you were a man and more than a man, even as Alexander, whose face you have seen upon a coin."

She closed her eyes, and speaking as if she saw a vision, said: "The East . . . the East sleeps on. But it is restless in its slumber. The East is waiting for a leader. It awaits another Alexander. It dreams of another Ghengis Khan, who shall make its plains and mountains echo with the footsteps of his armies. It awaits the coming of the greatest of the Great Moguls."

She ceased. All was silent. Not even the bark of a pariah dog violated the stillness of the night.

As if exhausted, she turned sadly away from Philip Carr and walked slowly down the path towards the village. All her intense vitality seemed to have departed. She walked as one who has a great sorrow.

Philip Carr watched her open the postern gate and go in.

PART III

CHAPTER XXII

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF AKHBAR SHAH

IN the darkness by the well after Dil Afroz had left him, Philip Carr, for many days swayed by the deepest emotions he had ever felt in his life, returned to reason—the one force to which a man may turn in his troubles and find hope. Since the great battle with the Itman Khel he had lived, as it were, on the crest of a great wave of emotion : now he felt again as he had felt in the caravanserai at Landi Kotal, when he had made Akhbar Shah his friend and bondservant.

Dil Afroz had spoken with vision—the vision of a prophetess. He knew by instinct that the day would come when the Chandi Chauk at Delhi, the richest street in the world, would run red with blood. He saw the mahajans (Indian bankers) lying dead

amongst their chests of rupees : he saw the priceless silks and carpets of the bazars made the loot of the conquering hillman : he heard the screams of the delicate girls of the zenanas fleeing from the lust of the victors. This he knew must one day happen. Was it not the common talk of every caravanserai ? Did not the Militia discuss it in every frontier post ? Did not the prisoners whisper it to each other in the jail outside Peshawar City ?

And yet Carr knew also that the day of wrath for India had still to dawn. The wild, primitive peoples whom he had grown to love awaited a leader—a leader who should have in him something of the divine, a leader who by terror should stamp out the blood feuds and tribal hatreds amongst them and unite them in one common purpose. He knew that they were capable of devotion to the death to an ideal—but that ideal must be a man. Moreover, he knew that whilst his own race ruled India such a man could not succeed.

And yet, the temptation placed before him by Dil Afroz was almost overpowering. Before she had entered his life he had been

strongly inclined towards friendship with all men; he had occasionally delighted in compromise; he had found something congenial in the ideal of the happiness of the multitude. But now he felt himself becoming appallingly selfish, he felt himself degenerating into a beast of prey. He felt that there was no end to which he would not go to secure her. He felt that if by the sacrifice of his immortal soul he could win her, he would willingly and happily abandon his hopes of Paradise, that of Christ or the Prophet, whichever it might be. With horror he realised that his moral outlook was being perverted: that he was losing his consciousness of the difference between good and evil. That deep-seated pride in the destiny of his own race which had kept him in the way of uprightness since his childhood was going from him. He had always realised that dishonour is worse than death. Death, after all, is a trivial matter to a brave man. Contempt for it is common to the high-souled, intellectual scientist and the Border rifle thief. The fear of dishonour to such men is a thousand times more paralysing.

The night grew darker. A few strong

gusts of wind raised the dust in the valley. He knew these for the forerunners of a storm—not a storm of wind and rain, but a howling typhoon of dust. The air was heavy and oppressive. It was gloomy and obscure—as dark as the night within his own soul.

And then suddenly all the world went black. Down swept a wind so strong that he was forced to support himself upon a rock. Blinded with the steely dust, he struggled to cover his face with the fringe of his “pagri.” With difficulty he breathed the red-hot air. The dust-laden breeze cut his bare hands and feet as if with a red-hot iron. He fought for life and breath in the darkness, alone.

And yet in the struggle with the storm he found his courage rise again. He tasted once more the joy of conflict—the greatest joy of man. He had something concrete against which to fight. For a moment he was granted a respite from the battle within himself.

The storm died down as quickly as it had come. Suspended particles of dust in the air still blotted out the stars. The darkness

was still intense, but over the valley had come a great calm. An ass began to bray. The pariah dogs again began to prowl around the village and quietly whimper amongst themselves. A cock crowed as if defying the retreating storm.

Light came to Philip Carr. He cleaned the dust out of the corners of his eyes with his knuckles. He spat out the grit that grated between his teeth.

Why should he not help these people of the hills? Was it not better to aid them, to lead them to a purer way of living, than to exploit their primitive virtues to a base end? Carr was primitive himself: perhaps that is why he was an idealist. Why should he not stamp out the fatuous vendettas that existed amongst them? Why should he not unite them in some common and worthy cause? He understood the strange, wild soul of these people—their intense hatreds, their primeval enthusiasms, their crude vices. He knew that contact with the West would debauch their unsophisticated minds. Nothing but evil could come to them from mixing with the civilisation of his own race at second-hand. Besides, he was losing

faith in it himself. Why should he not keep them away from the influence of his own people? Could not they slowly evolve something better on their own, free from outside interference? Could he not temper and soften the fury of the inevitable holocaust of Hindustan? Surely Dil Afroz would deem this a task worthy of a man?

He would seek counsel of Akhbar Shah. Certainly he would not be prepared to discuss abstractions. His mind dealt essentially in concrete things. But occasionally, like a child, he hit upon a truth long overlooked by more adult and cultivated minds.

Slowly he picked his way along the path towards the postern gate through which Dil Afroz had disappeared. He paused there reverentially, as a man does before a shrine; then groped along the mud wall, stumbling over rubbish as he went to the foot of the watch-tower.

Looking upwards, he cried out in a loud voice: "O Akhbar Shah! my friend, what news?" There was a shuffling on the platform above and then silence.

Carr cried out again. A piping voice replied, "It is not Akhbar Shah who is

watchman here. It is I, Mamun Sharif. Akhbar Shah is gone, I know not where. If thou art the young white stranger, come within. It is no time for a wise man to be abroad."

"Open the postern gate, and quickly!" shouted Carr in a voice of command. Impatiently he waited for Mamun Sharif to descend. He was anxious and annoyed by his friend's absence. What mad foolery could he be involved in now?

With scarcely another word to Mamun Sharif, he entered the house and crossed the courtyard to his room.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PRECIPITATE RETURN OF AKHBAR SHAH

ABOUT an hour before noon on the following day, Carr and the Malik, Ali Akhbar, sat at meat on the veranda. Allah Ditta, black anxiety in his heart, periodically appeared from some shanty at the rear of the anderun, bearing fat "chupati" after "chupati." The mess of curry in a brass bowl before them rapidly grew smaller and smaller. Both ate voraciously and in silence.

Carr had never known the Malik so taciturn, so morose as at present. He was frankly puzzled. He knew that he had not personally incurred his displeasure. Had he done so, Ali Akhbar would have either been mellifluously polite or flamingly enraged. He suspected that the old man had incurred a defeat in the privacy of his anderun, and had sound suspicions concerning the cause. The fact of the matter was that Dil Afroz

had flatly refused to obey her grandfather and marry Philip Carr, and Ali Akhbar was not anxious to admit his defeat to another man. Ever since his childhood three-quarters of a century ago, he had been the master of his women folk. Now he had to acknowledge himself worsted. He had raged, he had blustered, he had been physically violent, he had made use, and vehemently, of all the foulest and most picturesque oaths he knew. And he had failed to gain his way. He had sworn by Allah, by the Prophet, by all the devils in Eblis that never again would he indulge in eugenical experiments, at least if the offspring were to be feminine. No wonder the white people were mighty warriors if their women were such fiery-tempered fiends. He felt that he now understood why the white men marry so late in life, and then only one woman at a time. He was heartily convinced that an anderun could only hold one woman of the type of Dil Afroz.

The meal finished, Ali Akhbar carefully wiped his lips with the fringe of his "pagri" and cleaned his fingers on his far from immaculate pyjamas. Carr noted that he

was disinclined to conversation and forbore from entering into an exchange of empty phrases. Indeed, he was not anxious for the problem of Dil Afroz to be solved by Ali Akhbar. He had no taste for the rough-and-ready solution which he was convinced the old Pathan would eventually find. He was determined to endeavour to postpone a decision until he could find a way out of the impasse himself.

Ali Akhbar looked long and pensively at two small boys playing in the dust of the courtyard, and at length observed, ponderously, that in all things caution was necessary, especially in matters pertaining to matrimony.

“To have other than the best when the best is to be had is the wisdom of the unwise,” returned Carr, quoting from a learned pedant, the Munshi Duleep Ram, under whom he had once studied in Multan. The profundity of this statement was rather beyond the grasp of Ali Akhbar. He pondered the matter deeply. It certainly sounded like the very essence of wisdom. The Malik felt that his mind was not what it had once been.

At this moment the watchman on the tower showed signs of animation. "O Khan!" he shouted down from the tower, "it is Akhbar Shah, victorious as ever!" The Malik rose heavily from the ground. Carr sprang to his feet and stood by the Malik's side.

Into the courtyard through the postern gate staggered Akhbar Shah. His clothes were torn to rags and stained with dust and blood. The small and filthy skull cap on his head was coloured a deep purple. Half his beard had been pulled out by the roots, and the flies clustered in a dense and hissing swarm around the raw wound.

Akhbar Shah was not alone. He had two prisoners. One, a boy of about fifteen years, fainted, probably from loss of blood, the moment they entered the courtyard. The other, a girl of about the same age, squatted in the dust at his feet, exhausted, hopeless, resigned.

"Behold, O my master!" he shouted in a voice of triumph. "I have my revenge. Fifteen years have I waited, but I have it at last. To Allah be a thousand thanks. Look upon the offspring of mine enemy, Abbas

Ali Khan, thine and mine enemy, Malik of the Itman Khel ! ”

It was an ancient hatred, this feud between the two men. It had been the obsession of Akhbar Shah's life. He never spoke of it to any man. Indeed, there was no man so stout of heart in all Barsak as to dare to mention the matter in his presence. Fifteen years before, Akhbar Shah had loved Jehanara, daughter of Abbas Ali Khan, and the sworn enemy of the tribe of Ali Akhbar. Secretly, Akhbar Shah had wooed her and successfully until betrayed by another woman of the house of Abbas Ali Khan, a woman whose advances he had rejected. Akhbar Shah had barely escaped with his life in the night. Jehanara, his love, the one love of his life, was never heard of again. And now, after fifteen years, Allah had given him vengeance. On Him be praise.

“ I have my revenge ! I have my revenge ! ” he cried. “ The boy I will kill slowly so that he shall taste in full my hatred for his father before he dies.” And he drew the sharp blade of his Khyber knife lovingly across his hand. “ As for the girl,” he went on, exultant, “ after I have had my way I

will fling her to the lowest of our tribe. Aye, even unto Mamun Sharif, the watchman, upon whom no woman has ever gazed without contempt ! ”

The Malik chuckled with delight. What a man was Akhbar Shah ! Would that all his tribe had half his mighty heart !

But a strange expression came over the face of Philip Carr. Immobile, colder than the snows of the Hindu Khush, he gazed fixedly into the eyes of Akhbar Shah. And, for the first time in his life, Akhbar Shah's glance met a pair of eyes it could not return.

“ Enough,” said Philip Carr, in a voice that chilled all who heard it, “ enough of this foolishness. I take thy vengeance in my hands.” There was a silence in the courtyard—almost the silence of death.

Akhbar Shah's face became a face of stone. He bit his lip so violently that a trickle of blood dripped down over his chin. For a moment a fierce, savage light lit up his eyes. Convulsively he gripped the shaft of his knife. His mighty chest rose and fell as if he struggled to throw off invisible bonds.

Then, in a calm and steady voice, looking

straight into the eyes of Philip Carr, he said :
“ Even as thou sayest it shall be, my master.
But all ye who stand around, remember that
there is only one man who shall come between
Akhbar Shah and his vengeance.”

“ Take the boy and the girl to my room,”
said Philip Carr. “ And their blood be on
thy head.”

All the passion gone from him, Akhbar
Shah led away the prisoners to the room of
Philip Carr and closed the door.

Then, slowly and as if greatly fatigued, he
sought the shade of the wall, and sat there
alone until long after sunset, his head between
his hands.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PEACE WITH THE ITMAN KHEL

THAT very evening, towards the hour of sunset, Abbas Ali Khan, the greatest of the Maliks of the Itman Khel, sat upon the roof of his house with dust upon his head and garments rent. To the warm golden light that bathed the broad ravine, in which stood the oblong mud enclosure he called his home, he paid no heed. On the ripening corn without, though more abundant and fruitful than he had ever known since he was a boy, he failed to look with pride. When his large flock of goats was driven into the courtyard he did not even look up. In vain his asses brayed as they were tethered for the night; he honoured the return of his water-buffaloes from the bed of the stream where they had passed the day, contentedly wallowing in the mud, with scarce a glance. A woman of his household passed below him bearing a basket

crammed with the eggs his fowls had laid. A servant fed his Arab pony—the great pride of his life, brought five years ago all the way from the horse-fair that takes place every spring beneath the guns of the Sirkar's fort in Amritsar. It was Abbas Ali Khan's greatest pleasure to feed it nightly with his own hands. But to-night he gave it scarce a look. The joy had gone out of his life. He no longer wished to live.

To-night, Abbas Ali Khan felt the burden of his years. He felt that he had lost faith in the mercifulness of Allah. He thought of his sons—of Hussain shot in a raid upon the caravanserai at Dakka down by the waters of the Kabul river, of Abdul dead in some obscure affray in the dark bazaars of Peshawar, of Mahmoud slain but a few weeks back in the attack on the house of Ali Akhbar, Malik of Barsak. And now he had lost his one remaining son, the light of his old age, the man whom he had hoped would, one day, lead his "lashkar" to victory, who would mete out justice in his courtyard, who would enjoy the fruits of his terraced fields and be the lord of his many flocks.

A small cloud of dust down the valley to

the south was the only sign of movement in the calm evening landscape. Nearer and nearer it came, but Abbas Ali Khan, lost in the bitterness of his thoughts, noticed it not. In the innermost depths of his heart he called upon Allah that he might die. Of the loss of his daughter, he recked little—it was as nothing to the loss of his only remaining son, the man who, when he was gone, would rule in his place. Abbas Ali Khan felt that he had lived in vain.

For the first time in his long life he knew deep sorrow. Ever before, his lust for vengeance had stifled his grief. But now, he felt that this, the greatest possible disaster, had been written in his fate. He bowed his head before a power greater than he could understand.

“Who shall fight against fate?” he moaned and beat his bony chest. “Would that my father had slain my mother ere I saw the accursed light of day. Of blood and the taking of blood there is no end. O Allah, let thy servant die!”

The sun set behind Khair Sappar. On the housetop, Abbas Ali Khan wailed in his agony.

Suddenly, as if aflame with an overpowering passion, his eyes glittering in the fading light, he cried out aloud so that all his young men lounging by the gateway might hear, "Is there no one who is man enough to give me vengeance against that son of all the devils, Akhbar Shah? Are ye jackals or are ye men!"

He looked down into the darkness of the courtyard and dimly distinguished the figure of a man strange to him. "An end to this talk of vengeance," cried the man. "For of vengeance there is no need. Behold, without are thy son and daughter sent back unharmed by thy one-time enemy, Akhbar Shah." And coming through the gate, Abbas Ali Khan beheld the slim figures of his children.

"Art thou a djinn that torturest me thus?" cried he in terror. "O Allah! I have had sorrow enough!" "Talk not of djinns and reproach not the Most High," replied the voice. "Rejoice rather at His mercy and compassion."

Reassured, Abbas Ali Khan sprang down into the gloom and, overwhelmed with joy, recognised his children. Words cannot

express his happiness. Out of the anderson, careless of their modesty, streamed the women. All around, gaping with wonder, crowded the men of the tribe. Small boys pushed themselves between the legs of their elders to get a better view of the mysterious stranger. To their untutored minds he seemed a supernatural being. They half doubted his humanity. Surely he must be some benevolent messenger from Allah! In the fading light they gazed upon him in awe.

Philip Carr had well chosen the time of his coming. The dim light, the silence, the suddenness of his advent, all conspired to give his coming something of the divine.

Standing on a heap of dust in the dark courtyard, he raised his voice. "Henceforward," said he, "there shall be peace between the houses of Abbas Ali Khan and Ali Akhbar. There shall be between you no more shedding of blood. And he that has a grudge to avenge, let him forget it, lest evil befall him. Behold, I who am of the house of Ali Akhbar have sworn that whosoever shall take the blood of any man of either house shall die at my hands and at the hands of those who are with me. Behold,

Akhbar Shah, Sikundar Khan, Ghulam Hussain and all the young men of my house are with me and have sworn by the holy rock which is as Mecca that they will serve me to the death, that there may be peace between the house of Ali Akhbar and the Itman Khel. Who is there among you that will swear to follow me ? ”

“ I will ! ” shouted a swarthy tribesman beside him. “ And I ! ” shouted another. The warriors of the Itman Khel were all aflame to follow this new leader. They crowded round him swearing allegiance. The courtyard became a seething mass of excited men, waving their rifles in the air, rejoicing that the great vendetta was no more.

Up from behind the dark masses of the hills the moon rose, flooding the courtyard with silvery light. Carr sprang upon the housetop, and pausing for one moment faced the eager crowd below. “ Henceforward there shall be peace between us,” he cried, with arm upraised.

Then, leaping to the ground, he turned his back upon them and took the path that led to Barsak, his home.

CHAPTER XXV

CAPITULATION

AT that very hour of fading twilight when Philip Carr made the great peace with the Itman Khel and an age-long blood feud came to an end, Dil Afroz, in a dark corner of the nderun of Ali Akhbar, for the first time in her life knew remorse. Had she not sent a great and good man to his doom ?

In the garish sunshine of an Afghan afternoon she had watched him cow the fiercest of her kinsmen, the dauntless Akhbar Shah, who feared no man and called no man master. She had watched him lead away his prisoners to the room of Philip Carr, obeying a peremptory order with all the servile promptitude of a servant of low caste.

And afterwards she had seen Philip Carr call together the young men by the threshing floor. She had heard him speak to them as

no Mullah had ever spoken. She had seen him move their savage hearts more deeply than any fanatic preaching a holy war. Shouts of the wildest enthusiasm had issued from their throats. With almost childish excitement she had watched them brandish their rifles in the air. The very hills had shouted back his name.

In simple words and with great earnestness he had pointed out the abject folly of the feud with the Itman Khel. In a quiet yet ringing voice he had shown how unpleasing these ever-recurring deaths must be in the sight of Allah. With expressive gestures and apt similes he had outlined the causes of the might of the white folk in Hindustan. He had reminded them of how a race so few in number, individually not abnormally strong, had held and would continue to hold that vast and rich country in an iron grip. And he had said that the cause of their great strength was that they acted at all times as one man. Blood feuds and the vengeance of private spite were not their constant occupation. Always they thought only of the good name and the profit of the Sirkar whom they served.

He had gone on and told them of a great race, long since dead, close kin to the soldiers of Alexander, who had built the city whose ruins now lay abandoned in the valley close by. He had told them of a small "lashkar" which, detailed to guard the passage of a narrow mountain road, had held up a great army until they perished one by one by the sword. And he had told them of the great epitaph that a wise man had written on the rock above their graves.

With wonder she had watched their eager eyes cling to those of Philip Carr. She had heard them swear by all they held holy to follow him to the death, to do whatsoever they were bid, to sink their petty personal hatreds in service to their race. She had watched the hawklike tribesmen go away, each to his own house, saying but little to his fellows, struggling to grasp a great ideal, which in its freshness they felt rather than understood.

And eagerly holding back the strands of the matting which overhung the door of the anderun, she had seen him, towards the fall of the evening, go forth unarmed with the son and daughter of Abbas Ali

Khan towards the village of the Itman Khel.

Within, like a king dethroned, Ali Akhbar wandered aimlessly from room to room. He was like a man who has lost his grip upon the affairs of this world, who has seen his sovereignty pass from his hands into those of another and is powerless to resist.

In the fast gathering darkness, Dil Afroz felt that he would never return. The Itman Khel would fall upon him and slay him. The great opportunity of her life had come and she had failed to seize it. A man, one more wonderful than she had pictured in her most idealistic dreams, had offered himself to her and she had not taken him. The blank despair of conscious failure seized her in its grasp.

Restless and unutterably unhappy, she could not stay within. The close walls of the andarun seemed to stifle her very soul. Silently she slipped out. Not even the watchman on the tower saw her go.

With halting steps and drooping head, she took the path towards the well and sat

there bowed with sorrow, beneath the wan light of the moon.

* * * * *

Slowly and with leaden feet, Philip Carr made his way back to Barsak through the soft, warm moonlight and the silence. He tasted the joyless satisfaction of the soldier who, having surrendered, is permitted by the victor to retain his sword. He felt the chilly satisfaction of the hermit who forsakes the world and takes to the desert in the service of a beautiful but inhuman ideal—an ideal lacking the warmth of manly affection. It seemed to him that he had lost Dil Afroz for ever. Life stretched before him, a cold and barren desert. Had she not bade him be a great man of the sword, crushing down his fellow-men in his advance to a throne of unexampled brilliance? She could never understand a man of peace.

Soon the mud walls of Barsak hove in sight. Not a soul stirred. Mechanically he took the path to the well. There he would revive for the last time all his love for Dil Afroz. For the last time he would give

himself up to all the magic of her ardent personality.

And then, suddenly, he found that he was not alone. A warm, soft figure slipped into his arms. Save for the beating of their hearts all was still. And what they said and what they felt are known to themselves alone.

Towards dawn, as she unwillingly turned to go, Dil Afroz laughingly cried out in a low and happy voice : " You must bully me ever so little, Pheeleep," and embraced him once more.

Then joyfully she freed herself and sped away swiftly towards the house of her grandfather.

* * * * *

And as for the great wedding feast there was in the house of Ali Akhbar, is not the news still on the lips of every camel driver in the serais from Bokhara to Jelalabad ? And the great song that Akhbar Shah sang to the tribes of Ali Akhbar and Abbas Ali Khan at the wedding of Dil Afroz, do not the very boys still sing it as they guard the flocks upon the hills ? Is it not in the

mouth of every Pathan coolie who builds the Sirkar's railway down in Khyber? Will you not hear it sung in many a bazar after nightfall in the city of Peshawar?

Surely there is no profit in telling all these things, for they are known to all men who live among the mountains to the north-west of Hindustan or who tread the dusty roadways between Peshawar and the country of the Amir.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ADVENT OF IMAM DIN

THE warm days passed and the winter came. On the crests of the Safed Koh fell more and more snow, so that the mountains seemed clothed from base to summit in a brilliant white mantle. By night the stars shone brightly—nay, more brightly than ever: but the moon became the bringer not of languorous ease but of bitter discomfort. Icy blasts swept the valley of Barsak, so strong that a man climbing to the top of the surrounding heights could with difficulty maintain his foothold. All day the sun shone brightly as ever, but there was little warmth in his rays save at midday. And even then his scanty heat brought little comfort to the tribesmen, who, huddled beneath filthy and tattered blankets or wrapping closely round them cheap cotton quilts, or “resais,” sat dejectedly on the sunny side of their houses, regretting the summer heat.

He who had ample means brought out his "posteen"—the goatskin coats, with the hair inside, gaily decorated with fantastic designs in yellow, which envelop a man from neck to below the knee, in cosy but frequently verminous comfort. Some donned skin waistcoats likewise curiously decorated with yellow thread. But he who was poor—and there were many such—made what shift he could with tattered cotton clothes piled on top of each other, layer upon layer. Many a man in those winter days carried his whole wardrobe on his person.

There was little washing that winter in Barsak. Ali Akhbar, the Malik, being old and sensitive to cold, gave up the practice altogether, save for religious purposes. And even in complying with the laws of the Faith in this matter he became lax.

As for Philip Carr, he gloried in the cold. Four Eastern summers had not yet robbed him of his pristine joy in hard exercise. He revelled in his struggles with the bitter blast. While all the tribesmen, and even Akhbar Shah, sat huddled round a smoky fire of sticks, half paralysed with cold and nearly suffocated with smoke, he would rush to the

tops of the hills above his home and then, scarcely pausing for breath, dash down at full speed, leaping from rock to rock with all the agility of the goats of Ali Akhbar—those brownish-black creatures to whom nothing save a perpendicular rock face was unscalable, for whom no abyss had terrors, who bleated with joy upon the narrowest of ledges high above the valley.

Great in these days was the happiness of Philip Carr. Red was his face as fire-burnt brick, red as the domes of some of the palaces in Hindustan, when the rosy glow of the setting sun makes the red clay of which they are made seem even ruddier than before. "One day," he laughingly observed to Dil Afroz in the quietude of his chamber, "it will be purple, and then blue." Dil Afroz viewed the prospect with disfavour, and in her frank way said so.

Every day he advanced more deeply in knowledge of his adopted people. Already he had acquired much of their eagle-like intensity of gaze. His features were rapidly assuming an air of dignity and command. Scarce a man's heart failed to leap in willing obedience when his deep voice resounded in

the courtyard. Frequently nowadays he weighed out summary justice in the place of Ali Akhbar, who was gradually allowing authority to slip out of his hands. The daily crowds of complainants grew less and less. If possible, he was more severe in his punishments than Ali Akhbar. The tribesmen feared the terrible certainty of his justice, the ruthlessness of his vengeance.

The hatred of change of the East sank deeper and deeper into his soul. He was acquiring much of its awesome reserve. Once frank and open more than the majority of his own race, he was becoming taciturn and severe with all save one—and that was Dil Afroz.

Save for an occasional foray to punish, with prompt and speedy death, the few who forgot the peace with the Itman Khel, the winter drew quietly to its close. Never before had Philip Carr tasted so exultantly of the sweetness of life, never had he lived with such intensity of happiness, such profound realisation of all the blessings of man.

Now, about the time when the winter

drew to its close, and the women, and sometimes the men, began to plough their stony fields, which ran away from the walls of the houses of Barsak, terrace upon terrace up to the hills, a rumour came that Kandak Mishar (Colonel) Sher Mahomad had left Kabul for a tour in Kunar. Men said that he had much money to distribute, and, his character for avarice and lowly origin being well known, discussed in detail the amounts each tribe would receive. Great was the speculation as to the object of his coming. Every tribe in Kunar wondered why the Central Government should honour them with attention at such an unusual season of the year. Deep were their suspicions.

But, if the truth be known, they had little reason for their anxiety. For some months the Kandak Mishar had found his welcome in Court circles becoming less and less cordial. In particular, he had incurred the displeasure of a cousin of the Amir, and had come to the conclusion that his absence from the capital would be greatly to his advantage.

Rumour said that he was accompanied by one, Imam Din, a Turk, close in the confidence

of no less a man than Jemal Pasha, the Turkish military adviser to the Government. Round many a blazing fire in many a courtyard in Kunar the tribesmen talked of Imam Din. A pleasing fellow he was said to be, and devout. Much was made of his knowledge of the white man's way of war. A great traveller, too, men said he was, and gifted with many tongues. They said he had uniforms as fine as those of even the Sirkar's officers. Like them, too, he smoked cigarettes in the grand manner. All keenly awaited his coming.

Now the day arrived when the Kandak Mishar and his train reached the village of Abbas Ali Khan, greatest of the Maliks of the Itman Khel. Great was the excitement in Barsak when the news spread that their village was to be honoured with a visit.

All loudly approved of the orders of Philip Carr that the envoy from Kabul was to be treated as a distinguished guest. Fowls and goats were slaughtered for the feast. Long-hoarded stores of rice and grain were broken open. Akhbar Shah journeyed many miles to steal some tea.

Even Ali Akhbar ceased to sleep all day, and walked around the house with much of his old vigour and blasphemous volubility.

All Barsak was agog to welcome the strangers.

CHAPTER XXVII

A BISMARCK ORIENTALISED

WHEN first they left the village of Abbas Ali Khan behind them, Sher Mahomad, Kandak Mishar in the Army of the Amir, and aspirant to political power, chatted affably with his friend Imam Din, the Turk, as they rode towards Barsak on their shaggy ponies. Behind them trekked on foot a dozen or so shabby retainers with their baggage.

Both were dressed in long "posteens" and had large lambskin Persian hats upon their heads. Both were more or less well shaved, save for their upper lips, which were adorned with black moustaches adequately well trimmed. Both affected the brusque manner of the German officers who had taught them their trade years ago under Von der Goltz. Imam Din, in particular, prided himself upon his alert and overbearing air. He felt that he was a perfect imitation

of a Prussian officer. Beneath their long "posteens" they wore dark blue patrol jackets, cut high up to the neck after the German manner, with little brass buttons, disgracefully tarnished. But their breeches, boots and leggings would have made a British cavalry officer weep—they were ill-made, dirty and cheap. They were grotesque.

Apart from a certain shiftiness in the eyes, Sher Mahomad seemed a fairly jovial fellow. From his early youth he had lived by his wits, and hoped to continue to enjoy the fruits of life by the same means. Men openly spoke of discreditable incidents in his career ; but the general opinion was that Sher Mahomad was a bad enemy and that the wisest course was to remain his friend.

Imam Din, his companion, was a less prepossessing fellow. He had a sallow, muddy complexion that pointed to vicious habits and gross appetites. His manners were offensive and truculent. He had absorbed the military virtues of his models and to their vices he had added those peculiar to his own race. Crafty as a jackal was Imam Din : cruel as only a Turk can be. Even to Sher Mahomad, the ever-flexible, his manners

were insulting. Indeed, Sher Mahomad was no little puzzled by his companion. Why a Turk, above all an ease-loving Turk like Imam Din, should forsake the luxuries of the capital to wander amongst the discomforts of the hills at this season of the year baffled him completely. He sought in vain for a motive. Certainly it was not friendship for himself—Sher Mahomad was the last man to believe that.

Truth to tell, Sher Mahomad was weary of the hills. He was bored with the constant succession of ponderous feasts with savage but prosy petty tribal Maliks. He had not wished to come to Barsak. He was disgusted with the expedition—so disgusted that he was all eagerness to return at once to Kabul and try his luck afresh. But Imam Din had insisted on coming to Barsak. A thousand curses on his head !

The short distance to Barsak was soon traversed. All Ali Akhbar's people crowded round the strangers, eyeing them with intense curiosity. Several small boys were soundly cuffed by their elders for approaching too near. Akhbar Shah twisted the wrist of a young man who blocked his view. Allah

Ditta, the Malik's servant, dropped a dish of rice in his excitement. He noted with terror the disapproval in the Malik's eye.

Ali Akhbar and Philip Carr welcomed the two strangers at the postern gate with the traditional polite phrases which such occasions demand. Sher Mahomad was reasonably suave—indeed, so accustomed was he to silken words that he seldom descended to rudeness except with his servants. Incidentally, his servants loathed him.

But Imam Din acknowledged the Malik's greeting with a curt nod. A flash of anger sprang up and died again in the aged eyes of Ali Akhbar. Carr he completely ignored. He knew him to be a white man, but summed him up without even a glance as a poverty-stricken renegade. Imam Din had absorbed much of the Prussian lack of finesse from his one-time masters.

Carr bit his lip, but swallowing the insult, accompanied Ali Akhbar and the two guests to the veranda, where a meal of generous proportions lay ready spread. Sher Mahomad fell to readily, but Imam Din contemptuously waved aside the proffered food. In a dictatorial manner he demanded of the Malik] why

the blood feud with the Itman Khel was no more.

It was a gross error of tactics. All his hereditary resentment of interference in his affairs from outside flamed up in the heart of Ali Akhbar. Who was this foreigner who dared to treat him thus? With the greatest difficulty he remembered that Imam Din was his guest and therefore sacrosanct whilst beneath his roof. As if seeking guidance, his eyes sought those of Philip Carr.

"Since when," said Carr coolly, looking Imam Din straight in the face, "has the Amir Sahib placed a foreigner in authority over his own people? Indeed, your question would come ill from his honour the Kandak Mishar himself, whose good breeding I am certain would make him wrap up any statement, no matter how impertinent, in carefully chosen words. Were it not that you are a guest and therefore sacred, blood alone would wipe out the insult you have given my revered grandfather."

Sher Mahomad stood aghast at the clumsiness of his friend. For the moment he was at a loss to save the situation.

"Who is this petty cock that crows upon

his filthy village dunghill ? ” retorted Imam Din, contemptuously rising to his feet and turning his back on Philip Carr and the Malik. “ Beware lest the Amir send an army to punish your gross insolence ! ”

The blood rose in the face of old Ali Akhbar. The veins in his forehead stood out. He boiled with anger. For a moment he was speechless with rage.

Springing to his feet, he kicked over the great dish of “ pilau ” that stood before them and, turning on his guests, blazed out, “ Get you gone, the two of you, lest in my righteous anger I forget the sacred law of hospitality and stain my courtyard with your unclean blood. Get you gone quickly for fear lest my people shoot you down as you go away. I would not have them waste cartridges at a rupee a round upon such scum as you.”

And thereupon he spat in the face of the Kandak Mishar.

“ The Amir Sahib is my honoured ally,” he thundered, “ and knows not what ill-bred spawn hold the minor offices of State.” Ali Akhbar knew quite well the dubious condition of the Kandak Mishar’s affairs in

Kabul. Despite his years, he was no fool. The mere fact that the Kandak Mishar had no money to distribute was proof enough that he was of no consequence in the eyes of the Central Government.

Mustering what dignity they could, the Turk and the Kandak Mishar mounted their ponies and rode out of the courtyard.

Standing at the postern gate, Ali Akhbar hurled taunts and insults at the backs of his departing guests. "A woman of the bazar was thy mother," he cried. "And who thy father was, none knows, not even thy dam."

The two put their heels to their mounts and sped fast as they could down the valley, expecting every moment a bullet in the back.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WRITING OF A LETTER

FOR three days, from sunrise until sunset, Sher Mahomad, Kandak Mishar in the Army of the Amir, and Imam Din, the Turk, travelled with hardly a halt towards the plains of Afghanistan.

They scarcely troubled to conceal their dislike for each other. Sher Mahomad, indeed, avoided openly insulting the Turk. He was not the kind of man whose anger or hatred is for ever on his lips. His brow deeply knit, he meditated some mean and tortuous revenge for the humiliation in which the foolishness of his companion had involved him.

As for Imam Din, he made no attempt to hide his contempt for the sorry manner in which the Kandak Mishar had come out of an encounter with a minor hill chieftain. His vanity was such that he would not admit that he himself was entirely to blame for their undignified departure from Barsak.

In his irritation, he tugged repeatedly at his moustache as they journeyed on along rough tracks and through sinister ravines. Imam Din had not gone to Barsak merely out of affection for Sher Mahomad. In fact, he had always considered him a useless and lying fool. But for quite a long time he had heard strange rumours concerning events in Barsak, and in Barsak and the country around he had a curious and absorbing personal interest. He had long sought an opportunity of going there, and when he learned that Sher Mahomad was departing for a tour in Kunar, had hailed the news as a golden opportunity of carrying out a long-standing project. Indeed, without considerable risk of life, he could not very well have gone there alone. Moreover, he did not wish to arouse suspicions before the time for action was ripe.

Imam Din was annoyed. He had to admit failure, and the admission was exceedingly bitter to his highly developed sense of self-esteem. Moreover, the presence of a white man, and apparently a capable white man, in Barsak bade fair to jeopardise the success of a highly profitable but delicate scheme on

which his hopes had centred for over a year. Perhaps the Kandak Mishar had got wind of it? Every step they took his suspicions grew. A foul hatred for the man festered in his mind. Already there were sufficient who would require a share of the plunder. Moreover, there were many in Kabul who would welcome his demise.

Imam Din came of a race highly skilled in the practice of war. But there their talents ceased. And Imam Din was no more skilful in affairs requiring subtlety and reasoning than the rest of his nation. Unless he took action, and speedily, failure stared him in the face.

It took him three days of uncomfortable travel to make up his mind; but by the evening of the third day, as their small and shabby cavalcade approached the rest-house one day's journey to the south of Jelalabad on the caravan road, he had come to a decision.

The rest-house is merely a shell of sun baked mud beside a poverty-stricken village. There is a well there, which frequently contains water but fails in times of excessive drought. The local inhabitants eke

out a bare living by tilling the arid soil and by scanty trade with men coming down from the hills. The village has an evil reputation. Twice weekly the caravans pass by it in a dense cloud of dust. Unpleasant things are said to have happened to travellers who have fallen out from the caravan in the vicinity of the village. Government officials rarely make use of the rest-house. They do not like the neighbourhood.

But on this night Sher Mahomad thought little of the risk he ran in stopping the night there. His courage was beginning to rise again now that they were clear of the hills.

The travellers dismounted. There were three rooms in the rest-house, all more or less verminous. Sher Mahomad selected one, and his bedding was soon laid out inside it. Deliberately, Imam Din selected another and walked in, without a word to Sher Mahomad. Their servants busied themselves with the preparation of the evening meal.

The two one-time friends ate their meal in solitude. Night fell. Their tattered retinue crowded into the third room and carefully bolted the door. Their meal over, they fell

to talking in low voices of the "loss of face" of their masters at Barsak.

When all was quiet, by the light of a cheap oil lamp Imam Din in his filthy little room unpacked one of the dirty bundles which constituted his baggage. He took out a writing-pad, with a hideous portrait of the late Queen Victoria on the outside, and some envelopes. After considerable search he came upon a two-anna pot of ink, Japanese make, and a pen of poor quality.

Forgetful of his European manners, Imam Din squatted down on his hams in the true Oriental fashion, and after considerable thought began to write. Thought took form with Imam Din remarkably slowly. Moreover, he was handicapped by having to write in a foreign language. Over two hours passed before the letter was finished, and even then the writing barely filled half a page. A further half-hour was occupied in addressing the envelope.

At last, Imam Din carefully placed the letter in the envelope and sealed it. In a loud voice he called for a servant, heedless of the fact that the Kandak Mishar was asleep next door.

After some time a servant came in, with the flush on his face of one who is freshly aroused from sleep. He brought in with him some of the fetid atmosphere of the closed-in room where he was sleeping with his fellows.

“Is the boy still with you,” said Imam Din peremptorily, “whom I engaged at the house of the Malik, Abbas Ali Khan?”

“Even so, Excellency,” replied the servant.

“Send him here,” returned Imam Din.

The servant withdrew. A few moments later, a Pathan boy of about twelve years of age rather self-consciously entered the room of Imam Din, carefully removing his grass “chuplies” before he came in. A greasy skull cap covered his closely shaven head. He was dressed in exceedingly filthy and much-patched cotton clothing, which had doubtless known many previous wearers. His hands were shockingly unclean and the dirt on his face seemed ingrained. But, withal, he had a cheery and alert air. His dark little eyes sparkled with life. He seemed not one whit fatigued with the long journey he had just performed on foot.

“Your name, brat?” said Imam Din curtly.

“ Abdul Haq; Excellency,” meekly replied the boy.

“ See here,” went on Imam Din, “ I have work for you. You will take this letter to one Gurdit Singh, an unbeliever, who sells all manner of European things to the Sirkar’s soldiers, in the camp at Landi Kotal, the big fort. You must go quickly and tell no one of your errand. If you are questioned by anyone, you must say you go to seek your father, who works as a coolie on the Sirkar’s new railway in Khyber. Fail me not in this, or of a surety, I will seek you out and kill you with all manner of tortures. Here are ten rupees, which will be more than enough for your food. Gurdit Singh will give you another ten when you deliver the letter.”

“ Rupees Kabuli or rupees of the Sirkar ? ” replied the boy rather timidly.

Imam Din was surprised at such quickness in one of tender years.

“ Oh ! of the Sirkar,” said he testily. He wrote a few words in Persian on a slip of paper and gave them to the boy.

“ Get thee gone at once ! ” said Imam Din. The boy salaamed and disappeared without another word.

Whether Imam Din slept well that night or not is known to no man. Certainly his grief was decidedly theatrical when the murdered corpse of the Kandak Mishar was found next morning in the room next door. He raised a great hubbub in Kabul on his return to secure the punishment of the village near the rest-house, one day's journey on the caravan road to the south of Jelalabad. There were, however, those who said discreetly and in dark corners that no villager was the murderer of Sher Mahomad.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BEARER OF THE LETTER

THE boy Abdul Haq did not linger in the neighbourhood of the rest-house. Firstly, he had been given more money than he had ever owned in his life, and was in a panic lest Imam Din should take it back. Secondly, having never before left his native village, he was anxious to travel, and, with the enthusiasm of youth, was eager to start at once.

Abdul Haq was not afraid to move about in the darkness. He enjoyed the perfect freedom of one who has no worldly goods to lose. Not even the most suspicious robber would imagine that such a tattered young ruffian was the proud possessor of ten Kabuli rupees. Soon, however, his alert young mind decided that it would be better to wait until daylight and travel with the caravan when it passed by. Abdul Haq had heard great tales of the caravan. To journey as a member of

one was the ambition of his life. So he lay down in the dust beneath a rock and immediately fell asleep.

At dawn he woke up stiff with cold. He thought for a moment that he had lost the use of his limbs, but quickly regained it by stamping his feet. Soon the sun rose, and in its warm rays animation returned to the boy. Impatiently he awaited the caravan. From somewhere beneath his grubby garments he extracted a handful of dry maize flour and ate it. Abdul Haq had a digestion which revolted at nothing. A gulp or two of water from a stream near by completed his repast. With his knuckles he rubbed the corners of his eyes—that was all the attention his toilet received.

Still there was no sign of the caravan. The sun rose high in the heavens. Perhaps the servant of the Turk had lied when he said the caravan would pass to-day, thought Abdul Haq.

But, towards noon, a cloud of dust appeared about five miles away to the north, in the direction of Jelalabad. Nearer and nearer moved the dust cloud. Abdul Haq's heart beat high with expectation. For the thousandth time he made sure that the letter of Imam Din was safe under the folds of his clothing.

At last the caravan hove in sight. At the head rode the master on a shaggy pony. He must be a great man indeed, thought Abdul Haq. Never had he seen such an imposing figure. An enormous "pagri" was wound round his head, and a long flowing beard fell over his broad chest. Of rich soft cloth were his flowing garments, and on his feet were gaily-decorated shoes with turned-up toes. With the air of an emperor he rode alone at the head of his caravan. One day, thought Abdul Haq, I will be as great a man as this.

Behind him, mostly on foot or astride of mangy donkeys, came the merchants and other travellers, whose business took them from Bokhara, Kabul and Jelalabad to the great market of Peshawar in the country of the Sirkar. For the most part they were Pathans, but Abdul Haq noticed an odd Hindu or Sikh here and there. He voted these latter as persons of no consequence, being unbelievers. In fact, they were all eagerly looking forward to returning beneath the protecting wing of the British Raj. Few had pleasant memories of the land of the Amir. For the most part they had been lured away from their homes by lavish promises

of high rewards for working in the Afghan Public Works Department or in the Kabul Arsenal. Now they were disappointed men. Not one had secured a tithe of the promised rewards. Unfulfilled contracts, beating, lies and ever-threatening peril of life had been their portion.

Amongst them were two Mongolian merchants from Chinese Turkestan. The boy gazed upon them with wonder. Never had he seen such men. They were tall and broad, with flat faces pink and white in colour and destitute of hair. From head to foot they were clothed in padded garments of blue cotton. Of such boots as they had upon their feet Abdul Haq had heard talk. "These must be the warm boots they wear in Kashmir," said he to himself. Had not Akhbar Shah of the tribe of Ali Akhbar not told the men of the Itman Khel of these warm boots, at the great wedding feast of the house of Ali Akhbar, at the beginning of the cold weather? These must be rich men indeed, thought Abdul Haq.

The boy, however, was too cautious to mingle with the travellers on foot. He did not wish to attract attention.

Past him came the camels ; as countless in numbers as the stars they seemed to Abdul Haq. Huge beasts they were, with two humps, burnt sienna in colour and shaggy. Great bundles of skins and carpets from Bokhara, dried fruits from the Hari-Rud, and many other curious articles of merchandise hung on each flank of every camel. Supercilious they seemed, like persons of high estate reduced to menial tasks, despising the work they do. Through the nose of each was a "nakel" of hard wood, attached by a string to the tail of the camel in front. In strings of five they loped along, raising great clouds of dust beneath their cushioned feet.

The weird cries of the camel men mixed with the sound of the heavy blows they dealt their charges upon their flanks. Fero-cious, wild-looking men they were, with dirty "pagris" wound over their black flowing locks and wearing long and dusty robes of dark colour stretching down to their feet. Many had a short, curved sword hung around their waists. Often they have to defend their camels with their lives.

To one of these men, the boy Abdul Haq attached himself. Fortunately, the camel-

driver was desirous of company. Sayed Gilani was his name. He was a loquacious fellow. His talk was all of wild combats with robbers all the way from Bokhara to Jelalabad. Fascinated, the boy plodded on by his side scarcely noting the passage of time.

Sayed Gilani was not inquisitive. When he asked Abdul Haq the object of his journey and learnt that he was on his way to join his father, who worked on the Sirkar's new railway, he merely remarked that it was strange to meet one so young upon the road and fell into relating a fascinating story of a fight in the dark alleys of Kabul.

For two days Abdul Haq trudged on beside Sayed Gilani, amidst the dust raised by the caravan, and at night ate his food by the small fires they lit alongside their recumbent camels.

But on the third day, when they had left the fort of Dakka and the waters of the Kabul River behind them, they entered a pass which ran deep into the mountain wall ahead.

About noon the caravan came to a halt. They had reached the barrier in Khyber, which divides the country of the Sirkar from the land of the Amir.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SIRKAR'S CAMP

THE Afghan political officer, whose duty it was to hand over the caravan to the British authorities, strolled forward with a casual air, twirling his moustaches. Two of his detachment, rifles slung, and wearing a mixture of cast-off British khaki uniform and mufti, expeditiously pulled open the knife rests that barred the way. On the far side, the Sirkar's political officer, an Indian, was ready to admit the caravan.

Their conversation was apparently of a formal character. To both it was a matter of routine to which they had long since grown accustomed.

The boy Abdul Haq was much impressed by the British political officer. Never had he seen so fine a uniform upon such a dignified figure as this. Over six feet in height was he

and broad. His gabardine uniform was a perfect fit. His "pagri" was rolled with the greatest care and across his chest were many coloured ribbons. Sayed Gilani said he was a very rich man. The Sirkar gave him two hundred and fifty rupees a month. He must be high in the esteem of the Sirkar. Abdul Haq was awed.

At length, after a leisurely interchange of conversation between the two officials, permission was given for the caravan to cross the frontier. Amidst a tinkling of the bells around the camels' necks and the shouting of the drivers, the caravan lumbered on its way down the pass. No one troubled to notice the small Pathan boy who passed through the open gateway along with Sayed Gilani, the camel-driver.

For the first mile or so the track was rough and stony, but suddenly they came to such a road as Abdul Haq had never seen. Much of it was cut out of the sheer face of the rock. Above it ran another road, but on this the caravan was not allowed to go. It was for the Sirkar's motor-lorries, said Sayed Gilani. The road filled Abdul Haq with wonder. All the stories of the cleverness of

the white people, which he had heard ever since he could remember, seemed understatements. Great must be the wisdom of these people.

Hundreds of coolies were at work upon the rocks above and in the dry nullah below. Dull explosions were heard, apparently in the bowels of the hill-side. Timidly, Abdul Haq observed that these must be the djinns the white people made their servants and who ate into the face of the rock. But Sayed Gilani said it was only gunpowder and any man could use it, provided he were wise. He related the story of a Pathan he knew, who once found a little brass tube upon the road near here and tried to break it open with a stone. The djinn inside bit off two of his fingers. But Sayed Gilani did not believe it really was a djinn: he merely thought that the white man's magic was best left alone.

At length, the camels with leisurely dignity reached the caravanserai at Landi Kotal. In obedience to the harsh commands and heavy blows of their drivers, they squatted down in rows. Their heavy loads were soon removed and placed on the ground beside them.

Then Sayed Gilani said he must take them off to water, and catching hold of the string of his leading camel, lead the whole file of five out of the arched gate of the serai.

It was early evening. There was still time for Abdul Haq to fulfil his errand that very day. So, telling Sayed Gilani that he was going to see the Sirkar's camp, he went out by the other gate of the serai.

Boldly he walked up to the entrance of the camp, right under the noses of the military police. The men on duty there—No. 4398, Pte. Robinson, R., and No. 96, Rifleman Bhim Bahadur, a squat little Ghurkha with a round and jovial face—took not the slightest notice of him. How those two conversed is a mystery, for neither knew a word of the other's language. Still, there is no doubt that they were close friends.

Full of wonder, the boy strolled towards the fort. He stood open-mouthed at its size, and gazed with awe through the open gateway, until the British soldier on sentry duty outside, tired of being stared at, told him "to jas out of it." Rather from his tone than his actual words, which, indeed, conformed to the rules of grammar of no

known language, Abdul Haq inferred that his presence was not required.

For a long time the boy watched a football match between two teams of British soldiers. He had heard of this football game before, and could not understand it. It seemed to be a kind of fight. Abdul Haq was astonished that none of the players seemed angry. Moreover, both of the opposing "lashkars" seemed to take their orders from a man who ran about playing a small musical instrument such as Abdul Haq had never seen.

A thunderous roll of drums and the blowing of many bugles all at once pervaded the camp. The boy was thrilled to the depths of his being. Down the road marched a small body of white soldiers with drums and fifes, making a weird noise which re-echoed from the surrounding hills. At their head marched a fierce-looking man, wearing large white gauntlets and carrying a long staff with a silver head. Never had Abdul Haq seen such a gorgeous person. This must be the great General Sahib himself. Doubtless this was the manner in which he worshipped his strange god at sunset. Verily, the god

of the white people must be great, otherwise they would not worship him with this splendour.

Had Abdul Haq known, it was merely the "Retreat," after which no stranger is allowed in the camp and the barbed wire gates are closed. This is the hour when the guards stand-to and the sentries are posted for the night. It signifies the end of the day's work for some, and the beginning of hours of weary watching for others.

In complete ignorance of the fact that he was liable to be forcibly ejected at any moment, Abdul Haq continued his walk through the camp until he came to a number of tents by the roadside. These must be the bazar, thought he, and suddenly recollected his errand.

It was a wonderful bazar. The boy had never seen the like. Strange goods and foodstuffs were piled right up to the tent roofs. Around each tent were little groups of the Sirkar's soldiers, white, black and yellow, chaffering with the "bunnias." Abdul Haq, remembering he had a duty to perform repressed a strong desire to seize the first thing that came to hand and bolt.

He decided that he would deliver the letter of Imam Din first, and then look round for some really valuable loot.

A Punjabi soldier was leaning against the tent pole of one of the shops. In his outlandish Pushto, Abdul Haq asked him the whereabouts of the "bunnia," Gurdit Singh. The sepoy understood not a word of the boy's language, but catching the name, casually indicated with his head the shop opposite, and then, ignoring the boy completely, started to haggle with the "bunnia" over the price of a wooden comb.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE POSTING OF A LETTER

ON a board amidst his heterogeneous wares, cross-legged, sat the "bunnia," Gurdit Singh. Venerable was he in appearance, with his grey beard carefully rolled up beneath his chin in the manner of the Sikhs. Silvery white were his large, overhanging eyebrows, beneath which shone a pair of exceedingly bright and steady eyes. His "pagri" was of exceptional size and striking whiteness: so well was it rolled that it completely concealed the silvery locks beneath, twisted with meticulous care into a pad and held tight by a small wedge-shaped comb of wood.

His white garments were of good quality and clean, completely covering him from neck down to his pink feet. Gurdit Singh had an air of dignified benevolence and kindly wisdom. All men in the camp spoke well of him, even the Bengali clerks in

the offices, who seldom approve of anyone. "Gurdit Singh is a straight man," said the white soldiers. "A good fellow, that Gurdit Singh," said the British officers. "He'll get you anything. Nothing is too much trouble." Certainly he had been known to present a bill for payment twice over. But then, when remonstrated with on this account, would apologise in such a charming and deferential manner, that his client would go away almost regretting that he had not paid the bill twice over.

Gurdit Singh was the recognised head of the regimental bazar. Even the dirty little outcast who dealt in the unclean flesh of the pig listened to the carefully weighed expressions of opinion of Gurdit Singh almost with reverence.

Politics seemed to have no interest for Gurdit Singh. When men told him of the great things that were written against the Sirkar in the *Zemindar* or *Shanti* he listened politely, but obviously unmoved. No man in the whole bazar had ever succeeded in extracting from him a statement of opinion on any political question. He was a rigid economist of words. Indeed,

there was no man who knew what exactly was behind the benign face of Gurdit Singh.

Now on this night, the boy Abdul Haq found him seated as ever amidst his stock in trade—tins of fruit from California and Australia, tins of jam and biscuits, British and Indian made, tooth-pastes from the United States, cheap mirrors, trashy pencils, inferior cigarette cases from Japan, swagger canes and chin-straps from Ludhiana, knives from Wazirabad, cigarettes from Aden and Bristol, and countless other things—the whole romance of Western civilisation was writ large across the shop of Gurdit Singh.

At the moment, customers there were none, and by the light of a cheap hurricane lantern, Gurdit Singh with scrupulous care traced quaint Gurmukhi characters with a pencil in a large book open across his knees. This was the only form of book-keeping known to Gurdit Singh. Doubtless, if rendered into English, the book would have baffled the most learned actuary.

The "bunnia" looked up from his book and saw standing before him a small Pathan boy with a letter in his hand.

“ Begone,” said he, in a calm voice in Urdu, “ lest the Provost-Sergeant Sahib catch thee. Knowest thou not that the gates are closed ? ”

The boy understood not a word, but for answer placed the letter of Imam Din and the slip of paper he had given him into the wrinkled hand of the “ bunnia.” Swiftly the old Sikh placed the letter within the leaves of his book and closed it. Then, scarcely looking at the boy, he took the slip of paper and with deliberation held it close against the glass of the lamp. A keen observer was the boy Abdul Haq, but not a muscle seemed to move in the benign face of Gurdit Singh.

The “ bunnia ” crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it down at his feet, apparently without care. He moved two cardboard boxes of gaily coloured soap and pulled forward a small cash-box, the kind they make in Multan. Opening it, he took out ten silver rupees and carefully counted them out into the palm of his hand. He looked up keenly for one moment into the eyes of Abdul Haq. The boy shivered.

Then, placing the money into the boy’s

hand, he said "Get thee gone." The boy grabbed the money and bolted down the road into the gathering night, blank terror in his heart, he knew not why.

The evening wore on. A few customers purchased things from the shop of Gurdit Singh. Gradually the bazar grew empty. The "bunnias" began to close their shops. A Sikh boy, more like a girl than a man with his long hair and feminine features, pulled up the sides of the tent and left Gurdit Singh alone.

The infinitely sad strains of the bugler in the lines of the British regiment blowing "Lights Out" wafted across the camp. Save for the occasional subdued challenge of a sentry, all was quiet.

Then, in the privacy of his tent, Gurdit Singh took out the letter of Imam Din from his account book. Long he pondered over the address, keenly scrutinising it in the lamplight. Gurdit Singh's knowledge of English was not good, but with infinite trouble he managed to decipher the name of a man. He had never known a sahib with a name like this one. Lower down, he picked out the words "Marseilles, France."

Gurdit Singh was thinking hard. There was no profit in steaming open the letter. He had received the like before. Only Shanker Dass, the babu, could read French. Gurdit Singh distrusted Shanker Dass. Long he considered the question.

About midnight he yawned. With slow deliberation he pulled forward his little cash-box and, taking out a red one-anna stamp and a green half-anna stamp, stuck them on the letter. Then carefully he put the letter back between the leaves of his account book.

Ten minutes later, the Gurkha sentry on the "bhoosa" stacks near by saw the light go out in the tent of Gurdit Singh.

* * * * *

About eleven o'clock on the following morning, Ingha Ram, temporary additional post office clerk, picked up the letter from amongst the outgoing mail. For a second or two he held it between his fingers, meditating whether it was worth the trouble of steaming off the stamps or not. But at that moment the incoming mail lorry rolled up outside and he flung the letter into the mail-bag with the rest.

And if you want to know how the letter journeyed down Khyber in a motor-lorry to Peshawar, and was put on the Punjab mail for Bombay, and how it went with all the other letters on board the P. & O. *Narkunda*, and how the passengers whiled away long days of unbroken sunshine, you must seek elsewhere, for it is not written here.

CHAPTER XXXII

A LETTER IS DELIVERED

THE boy, Auguste Demarbaix, who cleaned the boots and washed the crockery at the Hotel St. Etienne in the Rue Galliene, Marseilles, had already knocked three times upon the door of the room of M. Rudolf Bessler. Three times he had taken up fresh cans of hot water. About ten-thirty he gave up all hope that M. Bessler would ever get up that day.

Herein he was wrong, for about ten-thirty-five M. Rudolf Bessler himself appeared upon the landing and sniffed with an air of disgust the odour of stale cookery, wafted up from the unclean kitchen somewhere in the lower regions, that pervaded the hotel.

He was not staying in the Hotel St. Etienne for pleasure. The establishment boasted on its bills of its "*bonne cuisine bourgeoise*." M. Rudolf Bessler was no lover of the cookery and mode of life of the French "*bourgeoise*."

He loathed the place. Only bitter necessity had driven him to take up his quarters beneath its roof.

Rudolf Bessler was tall and slim. He had undoubtedly a distinguished air. He carried himself in the manner of one accustomed to associate with persons of good breeding from childhood. His face was a study in refined reserve. From the wife of the proprietor, Madame Delessenne, to the girl Suzanne, who made the rather stuffy beds, he treated all women with restrained politeness. The proprietor was proud to have such an obviously aristocratic guest in his hotel.

M. Bessler was thirty-five years of age. Already there were grey strands of hair on his well-groomed head. The lines around his mouth and in the corners of his eyes showed that he had suffered much. Life had been no easy matter for him. He had taken from it all its gifts except worldly success: and yet he was not embittered. He still found much in the world to appreciate and enjoy.

To Rudolf Bessler, happiness lay in good music, well-cooked food, the books of M. Anatole France, and the society of intellectual and refined people of good upbringing. His

father, an Austrian noble of rank, had taught him to discriminate between the good and the bad, whether in a porcelain vase or a vintage, a book or a picture. Unhappily for him, his lot had not fallen amongst these things.

Varied his life had been, but not vicious. But his apparent virtue was due rather to his innate fastidiousness, his sense of the fitness of things, than to any rigid belief in virtue or religion. He was an Epicurean who had been forced to lead the life of a Stoic.

He walked down the creaking stairs into the *salle à manger*. He was mildly annoyed to find it laid for the midday *déjeuner*.

"Perhaps Monsieur will not find it inconvenient to breakfast in my room?" said Madame Delessenne, appearing from the dark passage. And she showed him into a little room off the landing. The atmosphere within was close. Madame Delessenne had an almost superstitious aversion from opening the windows. On the walls hung two hideous photographs of herself and her husband, doubtless taken on their wedding day some twenty-five years back.

Quickly she placed a basket of rolls, some butter and a pot of coffee upon one corner of the deal table, on the top of which a not over-clean pink check cloth was spread. A work-basket and a number of socks littered the table.

M. Rudolf Bessler sat down and rather languidly poured out a cup of coffee. Madame Delessenne showed obvious signs of embarking upon a conversation. She was a loquacious and inquisitive soul.

"There is a letter for Monsieur," said she, taking one down from the mantelpiece. "There were forty centimes to pay on it."

Bessler took it, read the address and noted the Indian postmark. With apparent indifference he placed it unopened in his pocket and continued his breakfast.

Madame Delessenne was much intrigued. "It comes from the English Indies," said she, hoping that Bessler would unbend. For weeks past she had struggled ineffectually to learn something of his past and his affairs. Bessler was silent.

"Monsieur seems in no hurry to open his letter," she went on imperturbably.

"Like the English, madame, I have found

the secret of life," replied he : " to live without emotion," and went on with his breakfast.

Madame Delessenne gave up the struggle and withdrew.

No sooner was she out of the room than Bessler stopped eating and, taking out the letter, hurriedly tore it open. It contained one sheet of paper only. Had anyone been in the room at the time they would have noticed the finely pencilled eyebrows of M. Rudolf Bessler perceptibly rise. He crammed the letter in his pocket and, lighting a " caporal " cigarette, rose and left the room.

The girl who sells newspapers at the kiosk opposite the Bourse on the Cannebiere, remarked to the small boy who assists her that the tall Austrian gentleman who passed that way daily about eleven-thirty seemed preoccupied that morning. He had bought the *Echo de Paris* mechanically. His thoughts were evidently far away—had the girl known how far, she would have shown even greater interest than usual in M. Rudolf Bessler. " He has a most distinguished air, that monsieur," said she to the boy, with a distinctly audible sigh ; and fell to dusting the already immaculate magazines.

The whole length of the Cannebiere he walked like a man who has something upon his mind. The bleat of the pert little taxicabs and the clang of the passing tramcars he heard not at all. He might have been in a trance. Not a look did he give to the French officers sitting outside the cafés, drinking their "aperitif." Usually he found much to amuse himself in the evil cut of their breeches and the bad fit of their uniforms. Often he would remark to M. Serge Bogandoff, one-time colonel in the Russian Imperial Army and now a waiter at the Restaurant Bussot, that the day was not far distant when officers would go to war in dungarees.

Mechanically, as if from long habit, he swung open the big glass doors of the Café de la Régence and sat down at the nearest marble table. Without raising his eyes he ordered a "café filtre."

The buzz of conversation, the click of dominoes, the voices of the waiters shouting their orders across the counter reached him unheard. The medley of humanity within the café—Southern Frenchmen, Spaniards, Italians, Russian refugees still wearing in many cases their threadbare grey uniforms

and ragged orders, stray Englishmen and Americans—this morning had no interest for that keen student of his fellow-men, Rudolf Bessler.

For two hours he sat there gazing blankly into the April sunshine of the street.

About two o'clock he suddenly rose to his feet and, with the air of one who has an urgent duty to perform, walked briskly out of the café.

He left the Hotel St. Etienne that very afternoon, leaving no address. Madame Delessenne still regrets the departure of the foreign gentleman with the distinguished manners, who gave a touch of tone to the hotel.

The girl who sells newspapers at the kiosk opposite the Bourse on the Cannebiere still looks in vain for him coming to buy the *Echo de Paris* daily about eleven-thirty.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CURIOUS ENCOUNTER OF THE BOY, ABDUL HAQ, AND THE VENERABLE PANDIT

NOW the boy Abdul Haq, when he fled in terror from the shop of Gurdit Singh, in the regimental bazar in the camp at Landi Kotal, stopped ere he had run a hundred yards and sought shelter. The instinct to take cover took possession of him. He looked around. For the moment no one was near, for the night had fallen and the moon was not yet up. His eye fell on a stack of water-pipes near the road. The nearest sentry was at least a hundred yards away. With the quickness of a hunted animal the boy concealed himself among the pipes, which, being of various sizes, were piled up in separate heaps.

Here, for the moment, he felt safe. Certainly a fully grown man would have found it difficult to conceal himself here, but for

a boy scarcely four feet six in height it was no difficult matter.

For a while he lay quite still. Gradually his heart ceased to beat loudly. One desire only dominated him and that was to remain concealed until daybreak, when the gates would be re-opened, and mingling with the crowd of coolies, vendors of firewood and others who would throng the camp, to make off with his loot.

Abdul Haq now had untold wealth upon his person. Had he not ten silver rupees of the Sirkar, given him by the "bunnia"? Moreover, there were five Kabuli rupees still remaining over from the money given him by Imam Din, the Turk.

Also, for some inexplicable reason, he wanted to get as far away as possible from the "bunnia," Gurdit Singh.

As he lay still among the water-pipes, Abdul Haq congratulated himself upon his good fortune. One day, when he grew older, he would return here and steal one of the wonderful rifles of the Sirkar. Then he would be a great man indeed when he returned to the village of the Malik Abbas Ali Khan. Great would be his name amongst

the Itman Khel. Men would treat him as a person of consequence and would speak him fair. First of all, with the Sirkar's rifle he would shoot his brother-in-law, who had only a Martini-Henry carbine. He would take his three asses and his goats. All men would speak of Abdul Haq as a man of weight.

Had not Akhbar Shah taken a rifle from a British soldier in this very camp, twelve months back, in the cold weather? The tale, passed from mouth to mouth, had been the wonder of all. Akhbar Shah, passing himself off as a coolie, had hidden himself in a nullah within the camp, close by the mule-lines of the British regiment, just before nightfall. In a tent, by the mule standings, were four white soldiers, all with their rifles, whose duty it was to see that the mules did not break loose. It was a dark and windy night. Akhbar Shah noticed that three of the British soldiers went to sleep and one remained awake, with the lamp burning within the tent. He crept quietly amongst the mules and looked through the open tent flap. The man who was awake and on duty seemed very young. His red and simple face

was hairless like a woman's. Akhbar Shah, silent as a panther, crept to the end of the line of mules and, cutting the heel rope of one with his knife, set it loose.

The British soldier on duty within the tent was new to the country. He rushed outside to catch the mule. He should have taken his rifle with him, but in his hurry he left it propped up against the side of the tent. Ten minutes later, having caught the mule, he returned. His rifle had gone. He woke the other three men. They had seen no one enter the tent—there was no doubt about that. They had been sleeping as heavily as only the British soldier can.

The senior British soldier was a fool. He did not alarm the camp at once. He merely reported the loss to the regimental sergeant-major half an hour after "reveille," by which time Akhbar Shah was five miles within the country of the Amir. To catch him would have required the mobilisation of at least an army corps, and even their chances of recovering the rifle would have been remote.

"One day," thought the boy Abdul Haq, as he lay amongst the water-pipes, "I will do even as Akhbar Shah," and fell asleep.

He woke with the dawn. In the dim light he saw the soldiers pull aside the knife rests that blocked the gates. Down the road swarmed a crowd of Pathans, driving donkeys laden with firewood and stones for the repairing of the road on the other side of the camp. Unnoticed, he mingled with the crowd, and going right through the camp, passed out of the gate by the caravan-serai.

This time the boy did not take the Khyber road, but branched off along a winding and steep path that led across the hills. Within an hour he was looking down upon the distant waters of the Kabul river. He was safe.

For fifteen days he wandered amongst the hills, finding his way by instinct rather than any definite plan.

On the morning of the fifteenth day he found himself in a ravine which he knew was near to Barsak, the village of the Malik Ali Akhbar. Now that there was peace between Ali Akhbar and the Itman Khel, he felt no fear in returning to his village by this route.

Suddenly, turning a corner, he came upon

the aged and almost naked figure of a man lying in the sunshine, his face in the dust. He approached cautiously and examined the man with interest. He was evidently a Hindu and well advanced in years. His body was emaciated to a degree.

There was little of the humanitarian in the boy Abdul Haq. Doubtless this was some mad fakir. He kicked him in the ribs with his bare foot. The man raised his head and looked wildly around. From the look in his eyes the boy deemed him insane. The man had a fine, intellectual face, an elevated forehead, the air of a student rather than that of a man of the sword.

A flash of inspiration came to the boy Abdul Haq. The nearer he got to his home and the farther away from the strong arm of the white Sirkar, the smaller his loot seemed. What, after all, were a few rupees? He would take this unbeliever along to his village and say that he had kidnapped him beyond the Border. It was quite conceivable that there was some wealthy relative in Hindustan who would give much money for his ransom. In any case, he would be able to tell a brave tale of how he captured him,

and none of the other boys would be able to give him the lie.

He kicked the prone figure several more times in the ribs. The old man staggered to his feet and dizzily reeled forward down the ravine towards Barsak.

Now and then he would fall to the ground, but, under the stimulus of savage kicks from the boy, would slowly and with infinite pain rise and stumble forward on his way.

Soon the round watch-towers of Barsak came in sight, clearly outlined against the unrelieved blue of the noonday sky. The two came to the threshing floor outside the house of Ali Akhbar.

The boy Abdul Haq looked towards the postern gate. Standing there, looking keenly at them, he saw the strange white man who lived even as his own people and yet was greater and wiser than any man of the houses of Ali Akhbar and Abbas Ali Khan.

"O boy!" shouted Philip Carr, "what strange quarry have you there? Bring your prisoner within."

Without a word, the boy drove the aged beggar through the postern gate.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST DAYS OF PANDIT KISHEN CHAND

THE boy and the fakir entered the courtyard of the house of Ali Akhbar. Scarcely had the aged Hindu reached the centre than he collapsed in a little heap, his face in the dust.

Akhbar Shah, who was seated in the shade of the shed that ran along the wall to the right of the postern gate, paused for one moment in the story he was relating to the young men, who sat in a rough circle around him, each with a rifle in his hands.

"Fling the unbeliever on the dungheap," said he casually, and fell again to relating his story.

Philip Carr saw the aged beggar fall, and walked with deliberation towards his inanimate body. He was struck with the refinement of the face of the old man. There was no doubt he was a Brahmin.

He clapped his hands. In a moment the obsequious Allah Ditta was by his side.

“Bring water,” said he peremptorily. “See that this old man is washed and placed on a ‘charpai’ out of the sun. Also give him food.” He turned on his heel and passed through the curtains that overhung the door of his own room.

“What new madness is this ? ” said Akhbar Shah. “To treat an unbeliever thus ! Why, the man is of less value than an ass with a broken leg ! ”

Words were not the means with which Akhbar Shah liked to express his feelings. He felt that the situation was beyond the scope of his vocabulary. Looking round, his eye lit on the boy Abdul Haq standing, with a mystified air, by the postern gate.

“Get out, thou brat ! ” he exclaimed. “We are honest folk. We want no thieves here.” And the boy Abdul Haq found himself lifted bodily through the postern gate into the outer sunshine on the big toe of Akhbar Shah’s right foot.

He was on his feet in an astonishingly short time and bolting down the valley towards home.

Towards evening Philip Carr crossed the courtyard, and entering the little room where the Hindu lay, stood by his bedside. He was delirious, and babbled forth a curious admixture of Western and Eastern knowledge. It must have taken a life of study to acquire the queer fragments of literature and fact which now poured forth from his distorted brain. His eyes rolled wildly beneath his lofty brow.

“What greater pleasure is there,” cried the old man in Urdu, “than to sit outside the Katachery and talk of the judgments of the Sahibs? I, even I, Pandit Kishen Chand, first class certified officer’s Munshi (teacher of languages) have found nothing so sweet.”

He raved on incoherently for a little ; then went on, apparently at a tangent: “Nay, Vaishnu Mall, your Honour is in error. Those who say that they will overthrow the ‘Sahib Log’ by only buying cloth that is made in the country, talk utter foolishness. What is your money to-day? Paper—just paper. Cannot the Sirkar print off millions of rupee notes and buy up all the cotton that ever grew? Where would then be your hand-spinning wheels? You talk of non-

co-operation ; what is it but the silliness of boys at school ? I am old and know the might and infinite wisdom of the Sirkar."

The old man paused for a moment. His ravings recalled old days in India to Philip Carr. He remembered vividly the quaint and illogical arguments for and against the Government, bandied from mouth to mouth in the bazar—it seemed centuries ago.

For several days the old man raved on in this fashion, the men of the house of Ali Akhbar regarding him with a certain superstitious awe, for madness is held as sacred in the East.

But an evening came when Philip Carr, going to the bedside of the Pandit, found him sitting up. He was terribly exhausted and so weak that he could only remain upright with difficulty. The madness had, however, gone from his eyes.

" I have been mad," said he, in a quiet and level voice. " No man, least of all your humble slave, can pay the great debt I owe your Honour. Nothing can hide the fact from me that your Excellency is of the ' Sahib Log '—only such would have treated a lunatic beggar in this wise. Many of the

'Sahib Log' have I known and not one among them who was not true to his word. There is no race like them upon this earth. Alone of all the men of various religions and castes, amongst whom my fate has been to mingle, they speak the truth. They are hard—it is fitting that rulers should be hard. You will hear much idle chatter in the bazars how the 'Sahib Log' bleed white the people of Hindustan. But in our hearts we know that it is untrue. It has ever been the fate of the people of Hindustan to be the servants of the strong. Happy indeed has been our lot that we have a master who is strong and at the same time just, nay, even kind.

"But, alas! I see evil days ahead of my people. They have forgotten the bad time of the past. They forget the great danger that lurks amongst these hills. They forget Timur the lame, they forget Sabuktigin and the conquerors without number who of old time ravaged Hindustan. Alas! I see again days of fire and sword for my people when the 'Sahib Log' shall have gone."

As if exhausted, Pandit Kishen Chand sank back upon his bed.

Looking out into the evening sunlight,

Carr was overcome with a feeling of sadness and regret. He thought of the days when Rome was sacked by the Goths and the Legions marched home. Was the day approaching when the legions of another and greater Empire would forsake their exile for ever? He felt as the Britons must have felt seventeen hundred years ago, when the legions marched south for the last time down Ermine Street. He realised their blank despair as they thought of the barbarians beyond the Wall and the pirates from across the sea. For India, too, a day such as this must one day come. Little would the Bengali's wit avail him against the savagery of the sons of Akhbar Shah; naught would the Parsee's wealth aid him against the fury of the Pathan.

Now there came an evening in early summer when all was quiet save for the cooing of the doves by the well. By the bedside of the Pandit stood Philip Carr. The old man's body seemed absolutely bloodless; his face had turned an ashen grey. A wild fit of delirium seized him, and for a while he raved like one who has been bitten by a rabid dog. Violent convulsions racked his body.

At length, with a wild look in his eyes, he sat up and, with the air of one inspired, cried out : “ That which is good and that which is evil and that which is beautiful and that which is strong, shall perish. But that which as yet knoweth neither good nor evil, but which is nevertheless of God, shall indeed live and be strong.”

He fell back upon the coarse blankets of his bed. He had ceased to breathe.

By the order of Philip Carr he was burned on a funeral pyre, after the manner of the Brahmins, ere the sun was set.

PART IV

CHAPTER XXXV

THE HEIR OF THE MALIK

IT was a bright morning in the late spring. The cloudless heavens had all the delicate beauty of some gigantic field of corn-flower in bloom. Over the gaunt masses of the hills, the vast blue dome of the sky seemed as if it were an ethereal, infinitely fragile and soft-toned covering, spread over the earth by some benevolent fairy. Not yet had it acquired the tint of finely-tempered steel which it gains during the long hours of the summer heat, when the rays of the sun pour down upon the tortured earth with all the cruelty of the glitter of highly burnished brass. Nay, rather, the sunlight was still as soft as the glow of a golden bowl.

From the direction of the trees around the well came the quiet cooing of ring-doves. Occasionally they fluttered to and fro amongst the branches, fearing no one, for it

was the mating season, and hid their brownish-grey bodies amongst the leaves. From tower to tower, and wall to wall, fluttered the blue rock pigeons, their nuptial plumage all glistening in the sun.

Through the hard-baked surface of the terraced fields peeped the first green shoots of the corn. Even the asses had ceased to bray and the pariah dogs to snarl. Some kindly spirit of repose seemed to have descended upon Barsak.

In his usual place beneath the veranda on his red Bokharan rug, squatted complacently the Malik Ali Akhbar. He had grown somewhat fatter and less active of late. His violent outbursts of rage had become not so frequent as of old. Perhaps the change was due to the peaceful atmosphere of the anderun now that Dil Afroz had left it ; perhaps now that he had Philip Carr to assist him in the government of the tribe, he felt he could pass the end of his life in greater ease than of yore. No longer was he vexed daily by tedious and involved cases to be decided. The one-time ever-threatening danger of the Itman Khel had been removed.

Before him, at a respectful distance, sat

Akhbar Shah, his leathery and deeply lined face the model of respectful attention. Both were patiently awaiting some important news : both were obviously trying to conceal their impatience beneath a veil of polite conversation. This, for Akhbar Shah, was no easy matter. He could do no more than assume an air of patient martyrdom which sat ill upon his battered features.

Of Philip Carr they had seen nothing since early dawn.

“ He had the air of one who has been bitten by a mad dog and awaits the coming of the djinns to possess his soul,” observed the Malik meditatively. “ Doubtless he is sore afraid lest it be a girl.”

“ Allah grant that it be a son,” said Akhbar Shah, scratching himself.

“ It will be a son,” confidently returned the Malik. “ Otherwise all my efforts have been in vain. What is the use of girl babies ? They can always be looted from another tribe when they reach maturity. Thereby much trouble and expense in rearing them can be saved. But with boys it is a different matter. A yearly crop must be provided for, otherwise when we are gone to Paradise,

who shall own our rifles, our fields, and our women? Great is the fame of our house and great shall it ever be!"

The Malik paused for a moment, then continued: "In days to come men shall say, 'Wise, indeed, was our chieftain, Ali Akhbar. Great and far-seeing was he. Did he not in his old age provide for an heir? With what wisdom did he not provide for strength and craftiness in his descendants?'"

He leaned over confidentially towards Akhbar Shah, and said in his ear, with the air of one who has great knowledge: "A fool may breed donkeys, but for the breeding of men, much wisdom is necessary. Alas, the fate of my offspring has been evil until this day. Evil was my luck when from the Red Devil I got only a daughter. But now, Allah, in his infinite compassion, has been merciful to me in my last days."

Noon drew nigh. The dark shadow of the watch-tower, which at sunrise had stretched right across the white surface of the courtyard, had grown fat and stunted. The asses and the dogs had long since crawled into the shade. Even the chickens had ceased to peck amongst the rubbish heaps

and dozed in the scanty shadow on the northern side of the Malik's house.

The conversation languished.

Suddenly, from within came the chattering of women's voices. The Malik struggled hard to prevent himself from rising to his feet and rushing into the anderson to ask the news. It would not have been seemly to display emotion before an inferior. As for Akhbar Shah, he, for no apparent reason, affected deep interest in the flight of a carrion bird hovering above the watch-tower.

At length a feminine hand jerked aside for an instant the matting that overhung the door; a voice excitedly cried out: "A son!" The matting dropped back into its place.

Ali Akhbar, to conceal his joy, kicked over the "huqqa" before him. Akhbar Shah sprang to his feet and fired his rifle in the air. Then both, looking a little ashamed of themselves, gazed hard at the stark masses of the hills.

Then, forgetting the presence of Akhbar Shah, the Malik said quietly to himself: "Now, at last, I may join the houris of Paradise with an easy mind!" The face

of Akhbar Shah shone in the sunlight like polished mahogany.

A further burble of female voices arose from within. The matting of the door of the anderun was again flung aside. Out on to the veranda stepped Philip Carr, a new-born child in his arms, and stood before the Malik. Not a word passed his lips. Pride was writ large across his face.

For a few moments, Ali Akhbar gazed intently upon the child. Dignity and affection struggled hard for the mastery in his deeply wrinkled face. "Allah is indeed merciful to his slave," said he. "When all my sons and grandsons were dead, he has given me an heir," and gazed long in silence upon the face of the child.

Akhbar Shah in his eagerness pressed forward to see the child, his black eyes twinkling with evident delight.

"See, O friend," said Philip Carr, "Allah has given me a joy of the world—a son!"

"May he grow strong and fleet upon the hills!" exclaimed Akhbar Shah. "May his bullet ever go straight to its mark! May his enemies ever go in fear of him! When he is nigh, let all men look to their cattle and

their women ! May he return from many a foray amidst the shouts and acclamations of his people ! May even the whisper of his name strike terror into the hearts of his enemies ! ”

And so saying, he fired his rifle many times into the air, so that all the world should know that an heir was born to Ali Akhbar, Malik of Barsak in Kunar.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BESSLER, PARKINS AND LEVINE

EVERYONE knows the lounge of the Grand Oriental Hotel in Manchester, that praiseworthy attempt to imitate the luxury of a world city in a provincial atmosphere. Everybody also knows the curious people you will find there any time from 11 a.m. to midnight, engaged in doing nothing, inartistically and expensively. It was here, on a wet May day, which always seems more depressing in Lancashire than anywhere else on earth, that Mr. Mark Levine had conducted his two guests from the luncheon room. The three seated themselves in the luxurious cane chairs which give that air of plutocratic ease in harmony with the mosaic floor, large palms and fluted ceiling for which the Grand Oriental is famous.

Mr. Mark Levine was a type common enough to post-war England—clothes of good cloth but bad design, too literally cut, patent boots with suède uppers, and a face disfigured by excess of rich food and unhealthy habits. Perhaps the most striking feature of his face was its alertness. Not for nothing had Mr. Levine risen (in five years) from the old clothes trade to affluence. The qualities which had enabled him to amass a fortune when the world seemed on the verge of collapse, to avoid the inconvenience of military service when even miserable little bourgeoisie of forty-five and married were dragged into the army, were written in his eyes.

The first of his companions, a shabby, ill-dressed man of middle age and obvious academic habits, would have seemed to the casual observer rather out of his environment in the society of Mr. Mark Levine. He was Professor Cyril Parkins, the metallurgical specialist of a leading provincial university. Sometimes, and in certain persons, the detached air and eccentric habits of lecturers and professors are not without a vague, unworldly charm. But there was

nothing to attract the sympathetic onlooker in Professor Parkins. Born in a provincial suburb, a ghastly waste of brick relieved by an occasional gasometer or hoarding, he had passed a life of greyness unrelieved by any extravagance of money or emotion. He was unmarried, ever proclaiming his contempt for the mind of women. And yet, in the staff-room of his university, he would delight in obscene stories, made all the more obscene by the fact that they were related in scientific terms. Nevertheless, though the capacity for enjoyment had long since left him, crushed by continual petty economies, he had a great desire for wealth ; he wanted the most expensive luxuries and vices the world could offer—that is why we find him in the lounge of the Grand Oriental with the financier, Mr. Mark Levine.

The third member of the party, Rudolf Bessler, was lost in the hearing of the “ Valse Triste ” played by the orchestra, and the digestion of a good lunch. Rudolf Bessler was a Viennese ; he had suffered many hardships in many lands ; he had an elastic sense of right and wrong ; he was an adventurer who loved adventure but who also

loved luxury. Practising vice, he could admire virtue ; he could turn aside from a shady financial transaction to enjoy good music.

" I wish the band would stop that beastly row ! " exclaimed Levine testily.

" Irritating in the extreme," said the Professor in cold blood.

" Well," said Bessler, in hesitating English, " I don't know that we have anything else to discuss. You, Mr. Levine, have agreed to supply the money. Mr. Parkins and myself provide the brains. I take him to the radium deposits ; he applies there his expert knowledge. I undertake to get the stuff out of the country, by means into which it is unnecessary to enter. Let us listen to the music and enjoy these admirable cigars of yours, Mr. Levine."

" Nevertheless," replied Levine, " I should like to know a little more of the means you will employ to reach the deposits. You say it is a wild country ; moreover, the natives according to the Encyclopædia are of a war-like turn of mind. Doubtless, your influence with the officials in Afghanistan and Russia is great, but I confess to a certain uneasiness about the whole venture."

“ My dear Levine,” said the Austrian, “ you have provided the means. Money unlocks all doors. It did not take me two years as a prisoner in Siberia and two years in hell in the munition factory at Kabul to learn that. You keep your part of the bargain and I will keep mine. As for Professor Parkins, he is entering our expedition in a purely scientific spirit, but for once his knowledge is to reap a reward commensurate with its greatness.”

“ Then I guess the Professor and I will go,” said Levine. Occasional Americanisms were one of his least offensive affectations. Ostentatiously he called for his bill, over-tipped the waiter and left the hotel, Professor Parkins shuffling along at his heels like an underfed dog.

Bessler heaved a sigh of relief. “ Thank God, I am rid of the swine,” he said under his breath. “ To feed with him is an ordeal.”

Two weeks before, in the flashy surroundings of a Brussels café, he had come upon Levine, reeking of the mean dissipations of a stucco city. He had recognised in him the very man to back his scheme, and had returned with him to England. Once an

officer in a high-class Austrian regiment, the war had taken him as a prisoner to Siberia, whence he had escaped to Afghanistan. Here, his undoubted ability with motor engines and electric apparatus had secured him hard but unremunerative employment in the arsenal. By chance, one of the Amir's officials had brought him one day some specimens of ores picked up on a recent tour in the wilder parts of the country. Bessler, although he had little metallurgical knowledge, had recognised them as of a great value, and with convincing sangfroid pronounced them as useless. He had been clever enough, however, to keep the specimens and obtain a rough idea as to the whereabouts of the deposits.

Now in the arsenal was a Turk with whom Bessler was on good terms. The Turk, moreover, was a man of considerable influence, and when Bessler unfolded to him his scheme of securing a fortune, he readily became a party. He was, indeed, no other than Imam Din. By his aid, Bessler returned to Europe to secure money and expert advice, Imam Din undertaking in the meantime to secure access to the deposits by

judicious bribery. Bessler's party was to return to Afghanistan via Merv and to be smuggled up country in the retinue of an official.

The whole affair was promising. Money was all that was needed—money which thus invested would be repaid a thousandfold. Bessler had no doubts about the ease with which he could convey a caravan load of ore from the railway at Tashkent to Odessa on the Black Sea. The Turk had promised to make matters easy in Afghanistan.

As he finished his cigar in the Grand Oriental, Rudolf Bessler felt optimistic. A life of ease, beautiful music, the Riviera, Paris . . . Bessler saw before him the Paradise of the Prophet on this earth. And who shall blame him that he took the risk?

CHAPTER XXXVII

PREMONITION

FOUR days later, in the evening, Rudolf Bessler and Professor Parkins descended from the "rapide" at Marseilles, and travelling to the docks in a taxi, embarked upon the s.s. *City of Katmandu* for Port Said.

Bessler had reasons for taking this route, not unconnected with the letter of Imam Din. Moreover, he was not anxious to pass through his own country: there were those who had no love for Rudolf Bessler in Austria.

They mixed little with the other passengers, who were, for the most part, bound for India, many for the first time, and therefore cautious in the friendships they made. The men on board treated Professor Parkins with obvious disdain. "What can you do with a fellow who sleeps in his undervest?" said Major Hopkins of the 29th Lancers to his

cabin companion, John Cyrus Smith, the Sessions Judge. They were more ready to associate with Bessler: despite the fact that he was a foreigner, there was no denying that he had the air of a man of breeding.

All day long the ship moved steadily across a sea of unruffled calm. Not a cloud stained the soft beauty of the sky. From sunrise to sunset the ship was bathed in glorious sunshine, not harsh and cruel like that of the East, but mellow and consoling as befits the light of an ancient sea. Round the bows, the foam frothed whiter than even the snows of Nanga Parbat and Everest, whiter than the plumage of a swan. On either side, the water displaced by the hull of the ship was mottled like marble hewn from some quarry in Paradise.

All day long in his deck-chair Rudolf Bessler sat gazing upon the calm waters—more blue, he thought, than the wings of the butterflies in Tyrol. He had little taste for the society of the Professor. Never had he met a man with whom he had so little in common. To Professor Parkins, the blue of the sea was merely the reflection of the sky in a large quantity of salt water; the sun

light but the radiation of a molten mass of elements governed by the laws of mathematics. But Bessler suffered most when he sat beside him at meals in the saloon. The sight of him devouring huge slices of fat ham made Bessler strongly desire to vomit.

Yet, despite the serenity of the unclouded sky and the peaceful waters, Bessler could not get rid of the feeling that he was being carried to some awful doom by an inexorable fate. The slow grumble of the turbines seemed like an ever-present reminder of threatening danger, against which he felt powerless to act.

Now on the evening of the third day, Bessler leaned over the rail and gazed upon the dark shapes of the Lipari Islands, those sinister volcanic cones that stand out of the surrounding waters like the peaks of a lost continent. Ahead, on the horizon, stretched the grey mass of Southern Italy and the rugged outline of the Sicilian coast. Behind him, in a mist of pink and gold, the sun was setting. Its last rays shining over the waters made the dark coastline seem as if swathed in a mantle of bluish smoke. Slowly the steamer neared the opening of the Straits.

Quickly the ruddy orb of the sun sank beneath the western horizon in the wake of the ship. The most wonderful of all the anthems in the greatest of all cathedrals was at an end.

Above Sicily the rich yellow crescent of the new moon rose in a sky of lambent blue. A great hush descended upon the sea. Suddenly the twinkling lights of Reggio and Messina flashed out on either side as the ship entered the Straits. It seemed as if all the stars had been swept from the sky and cast in great handfuls upon the coasts. Across the dark waters the moon had cast a shimmering path from the ship right to the foot of Etna.

"Words cannot describe a scene such as this," reflected Bessler as he leaned over the rail. "The artist is as yet unknown who could express the sublimity of it all." And at that moment there was brought home to him the awful loneliness of the human soul.

Slowly the moon set behind the dark mass of Sicily; slowly the lights of Reggio were engulfed in the gathering darkness. Only the flaming cone of Etna relieved the blackness of the southern sky.

In the ever-growing darkness, a chill enwrapped the soul of Rudolf Bessler. A feeling stronger than reason told him that the glory of the evening had been but an idealised pageant of his own life. First there had been the splendour of everything he had loved and found beautiful, then the gathering gloom until only the glow of Etna lit up the blackness of the heavens. The conviction that he also, with all his love of life, must soon go down into awful night pervaded his whole being.

Soon the glowing crest of Etna was lost behind a bend in the Straits and all was dark.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

PORT SAID

THE s.s. *City of Katmandu* ran into Port Said about eleven o'clock at night and was moored opposite the offices of the Eastern Telegraph Company. The night was hot and lurid : from the canal waters rose a faint smell of decay. Around the ship at once swarmed crowds of rowing boats, eagerly competing with each other for the custom of the passengers going ashore. Above, the revolving light cast long beams across the harbour and out to the open sea.

Bessler disliked Port Said. To disembark with your baggage there at night is an undertaking of considerable anxiety. But Bessler was not amongst those passengers who on such occasions are almost reduced to a state of gibbering imbecility through fear of losing their luggage. The Professor, certainly, showed signs of panic. He had, indeed, never been out of his own country before—

not even under the paternal care of the Government during the Great War.

However, Bessler took control of the situation with considerable *savoir faire*, arranged for their belongings to be sent to the Imperial Hotel, and pushed the Professor down the companion-way into the arms of a greasy Egyptian, clad only in what seemed to be an exceedingly filthy sleeping garment and a "tarbush," or "fez," as they call such headgear in countries where they are never worn except at masquerades. Despite the late hour, they found all the shops in the Rue du Commerce ablaze with electric light, their proprietors and assistants prepared to sit up until any hour so long as sufficient travellers to be plundered remained ashore.

Bessler pushed the Professor into a moth-eaten victoria and told the Arab driver to take them to the Imperial Hotel. The fellow stank evilly—rather like a marine-store dealer's yard in fact, or a currency note that has passed through the hands of many natives. He tried to take them into the darkness of a back street, thinking that here he had two victims absolutely asking to be robbed, but he learnt from Bessler more

reflections upon his ancestry and the morals of his family, expressed in fluent Arabic, than he had heard for a long time. In case his meaning had not been adequately conveyed, the Austrian repeated it in French.

And thus it came about that, within five minutes, they found themselves standing in the reception hall of the Imperial Hotel. The driver of the victoria went sadly away. For once he had failed to secure ten times his legal fare—that is, of course, if there is such a thing as a legal fare in Port Said.

Rooms were soon engaged, but the luggage had not yet arrived. Moreover, Bessler had affairs in Port Said that very night. He was annoyed at having to stop at the place at all, but the instructions of Imam Din had explicitly stated that they should wait here until certain negotiations he was carrying on with Piotor Semenoff, a Commissar in Azerbaijan, and one Jemal Bey, in Angora, were complete.

So, along with the Professor, who, with many a grumble at the heat, slunk along by his side, they strolled along towards the glare of the Rue du Commerce. Immediately a swarm of Arab hawkers clustered around

them, trying to sell cigarettes and picture-postcards at exorbitant prices. Touts of nondescript nationality pestered them to visit the more than doubtful haunts of pleasure of the city.

Professor Parkins would have liked to patronise these fellows. Now that he had left his native land, he felt that there was no longer any necessity so strictly to observe the conventions as at home. But a word or two from Bessler made them raise their eyebrows and quickly seek other clients.

They came to the cross-roads where, in the Continental manner, the cane tables and wicker chairs of a café stood out in the street beneath the electric lamps. They sat down. Bessler ordered coffee.

For once the Professor found him more than usually disinclined to conversation. Moreover, he was disappointed, having hoped to spend the night hours in quite a different fashion. Fortunately for himself, he had not the courage to wander off on his own.

At the tables close by them were seated several of their fellow-passengers, obviously feeling that they were doing something

frightfully rakish, although " Bohemian " was the word they used amongst themselves.

With the casual air of one to whom time is no object, Bessler glanced around the café, his eyes finally settling upon two individuals seated at a table on the far side and drinking nothing. They were wearing straw hats, rather seedy clothes, and bilious-looking brown boots, buttoned up at the side. They might have been Frenchmen had not one of their ancestors had an intrigue with a native woman. As it was, they could in no society mention their nationality with pride. Physically, they were inferior specimens of the human race and had the appearance of having suffered from jaundice from early youth. They were watching Bessler and the Professor with interest.

At length one of them rose and, with an unconcerned air, walked over to their table. Surreptitiously he took a letter out of his pocket and said in a low voice, " Mr. Bessler, I believe ? "

Bessler nodded his head, and as he took the letter, Professor Parkins heard him say, " Room 39, Imperial Hotel."

" The *Pisco* leaves Alexandria for Stamboul

the day after to-morrow about noon," replied the man. "Monsieur will pardon me if I withdraw? The berths are booked. I know nothing further. Here is my card in case you have any occasion for my services."

He raised his battered straw hat and rejoined his companion.

With a nonchalant air, Bessler opened the letter and with apparent indifference read its contents.

"As I thought," at length said he in an undertone, as if speaking to himself. "Stamboul—Poti on the Black Sea—then Tiflis—Baku—across the Caspian—Krasnovodsk to Merv (how I loathe that railway!)—Imam Din to meet us at Merv—I suppose that way will do as well as any other—at any rate I shall be glad to get away from this filthy hole."

"A cosmopolitan place this," observed the Professor, anxious to assure Bessler of his complete adherence to any arrangements that he might make, by changing the subject.

"Cosmopolitan indeed!" interjected the Austrian. "A place where all the festering vices of several ancient civilisations are grafted on to everything that is abominable

in Southern Europe and all the corruption brought into Islam by the Turk ! ” And he savagely ordered away the parasites who hung round them offering souvenirs from the Holy Land, villainously coloured beads and tawdry jewellery.

“ For those who wish to buy solar topis, bogus Oriental goods or obscene literature, doubtless the place has its attractions,” continued Bessler. “ For me, it is merely a terrible example of human degradation.” He turned his head away from the Professor.

Now there was one Arab who refused to be shaken off. He hung around with the persistency of a fly upon a heap of filth. He was an evil-looking knave, with a cast in one of his dissipated eyes.

“ Fortune-teller, sah ! ” he whined.

“ Go to Hell ! ” said Bessler, his anger rising, and looking the Arab straight in the eye. The fellow met his glance.

“ All right, Mr. Macgregor,” said he, in bastard English. “ I tell your fortune for nothing.”

He relapsed into Arabic. “ There are those,” he went on, “ who go on long journeys and never return. There are those who will

never see another cold season, and I know one of them ! ”

At that moment, an Egyptian policeman, in a blue uniform and red “ tarbush,” kicked the fortune-teller into the street, and he was seen no more ; but all that night Bessler could not shake off the depression which had descended upon him. The evil leer in the fellow’s eyes lingered in his mind for many days.

Two days later they sailed from Alexandria to Constantinople.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE MESSENGER

ONE afternoon in the middle of the hot weather, when Barsak lay apparently lifeless in the blinding sunlight, there came to the postern gate of Ali Akhbar's village a man who had evidently travelled far and speedily. His clothes were grey with dust ; dust was in his beard ; his face and bare legs seemed as if made of clay.

Without ceremony he pushed open the gate, and spying a man asleep on the " charpoi " in the shed beneath the wall, went up to him and shook him by the shoulder violently. Now the sleeping man was none other than Akhbar Shah : the stranger could not have chosen a worse man to rouse rudely in the heat of the afternoon. Before he had time to speak, he found himself whirled off his feet and sitting in the dust spitting out two of his teeth from his bleeding mouth.

“ I bring a message from the Amir,” spluttered the man. “ Tenfold shalt thou pay for this insult when my master comes ! ”

“ I do not care even if thou comest from Allah himself,” replied Akhbar Shah and, rolling over on his side, went off to sleep again.

With a look of bitter hatred towards the sleeping man, the messenger slowly picked himself out of the dust and sought out Allah Ditta. With an arrogant air he explained that he had an urgent message for the Malik’s ear alone, that he came with the authority of the Amir himself, and that sorely would the village suffer for the insult he had received.

Allah Ditta was impressed, but being a tactful man, pointed out that it would be inexpedient to awake the Malik at this hour. He suggested that it would be more fitting to wait until the cool of the evening, when the Malik should have risen refreshed from his slumber and be in a suitable frame of mind in which to receive a bearer of important news.

So the messenger was forced to wait in the shade until the sun should decline a little, and, tired by his long journey, was soon asleep. When he awoke three hours later,

the ardour of the sun had abated, and all Barsak was alive again. Filthy with dust though he was, Allah Ditta ushered him into the presence of Ali Akhbar. In an overbearing manner he advanced towards the Malik and made a very perfunctory reverence.

“ O Khan ! ” said he, in a voice thick with dust, “ I come with letters from his Highness the Amir himself. But as it is unlikely that there is one here who can read, I am charged to explain their purport. Behold, in two days’ time, the Amir’s envoy, Imam Din, with two distinguished companions of high rank in their own country, shall come here and stay as guests for some days. His Highness has decreed that they be allowed to pass freely over your lands, without let or hindrance, and be treated with every honour. They are to be permitted to do what they will, for their mission is of the highest importance in the eyes of his Highness the Amir.”

Now in the heart of Ali Akhbar almost uncontrollable anger welled up. His independence had been challenged. Never before had he been treated other than as a loyal ally. Never had his right to do what he

wished in his own territories been questioned. Moreover, the bearer of the authority of the Amir was none other than his enemy, Imam Din, the Turk, who had as yet paid no penalty for the insult he had given him last winter. With him were two foreigners—this was ominous. The cherished liberty of his people was in danger.

With a tremendous effort he controlled himself. He realised that he would need all his wits in the course of the next few days. With quiet dignity he said, "Even so let it be," and turning to Allah Ditta, ordered him to find a lodging for the messenger and to treat him with consideration.

For a long time Ali Akhbar sat alone upon his veranda, considering the means he should adopt to circumvent the menace to the freedom of his people. In the hearts of Ali Akhbar and his tribe there was no stronger passion than hatred of interference from without. All foreigners they regarded with deep suspicion. Even to question their independence was to rouse their wildest passions.

By instinct Ali Akhbar knew that Imam Din and his party were coming to pry into

the secrets of the valley behind the City of the Dead, where his own people had ever feared to go. Almost as a matter of habit, he considered asking the advice of Philip Carr. But he, too, was a foreigner. A black suspicion crossed his mind that even the husband of his granddaughter was also biding his time to filch the liberty from his tribe. He decided for once to keep his own counsel.

Until the night was far advanced he sat alone upon his veranda, and when at last all was quiet, went unobtrusively to his bed without a word to anyone.

That evening the rumour of the coming of foreigners flashed around the tribe. In low voices the men discussed it among themselves. A wave of suspicion that all which they held dearest was in danger passed over them. Even in Philip Carr their confidence was shaken. After all, even he was but a foreigner. That he had married the granddaughter of Ali Akhbar and even acted as one of their own tribe went for nothing. Why, after all, had he deserted his own people and come to live as one of them? It was not natural that a man should abandon

his own country unless he had some great end to gain.

That night, in every mud tower of Barsak, the watchman meditated upon the menace to his liberties, to the sacred privacy of his barren hills. Men talked of it quietly beneath the flat roofs of their houses. Women whispered it to each other in every *anderun*.

All, like Ali Akhbar, decided to wait quietly in readiness until the time for action should arrive.

Even to Dil Afroz the rumour came. Philip Carr found her pensive and silent, as if a great fear had taken possession of her soul. Scarcely a word did she utter, but long remained holding the baby to her breast. No longer she thought of herself or Philip Carr. The safety of her child was threatened, she knew not how. A vague atmosphere of impending danger pervaded the *anderun* of Philip Carr. It took possession of even his volatile spirit. He felt powerless to act.

Despite the cool breeze that sprang up soon after sunset, there was little sleep that night in Barsak in Kunar.

CHAPTER XL

THE COMING OF THE STRANGERS

DURING the next two days, as he wandered through the village, Philip Carr noticed a marked change in the bearing of the tribesmen towards him. They had lost their usual frank heartiness; everywhere they received him with politeness—politeness which hurt him more deeply than if they had offered open insult. An air of repressed excitement hung over Barsak, and yet, to all outward appearance, the village was more than usually calm. It seemed as if an enormous thundercloud hung over the village, charged with electricity and liable to break at any moment.

Dil Afroz, too, had lost all her vivacity. She seemed to be possessed by some appalling, paralysing fear, which she was powerless to explain.

And yet, to the Malik, fresh life seemed

to have returned. He waddled around the village supervising the arrangements which were being made for the entertainment of the guests. Never had preparations been made on such a lavish scale. The best of the young goats were slaughtered, long-hoarded stores of raisins and spices were opened, five men were sent on a long journey to fetch water melons. Even in the heat of the day the work continued under the sharp eyes of the Malik, who seemed indifferent to the sun. No longer did he desire to sit in the shade and smoke or sleep. He seemed rejuvenated. And yet his outward manner towards Philip Carr remained unchanged, except that, perhaps, he was a little more ceremonious than was his wont.

Soon after noon on the second day, a watchman posted on the bare crest of Khair Sappar signalled the approach of the strangers. A tremor of excitement passed through the village.

About an hour later, amidst a cloud of dust, a party of men, about twenty in number, with two camels and a number of donkeys trailing in the rear with the baggage, rounded the bend in the valley and approached Barsak.

At the head, mounted upon ponies, rode three men. At half a mile range Philip Carr picked out the sinister figure of Imam Din dressed in his blue uniform jacket and black lambskin hat despite the heat. Beside him rode two other men, obviously Europeans. Philip Carr's heart sank. At the worst he had expected two more Turks or Persians.

As they came nearer, standing on the watch-tower by Ali Akhbar's side he watched them closely. The one was a tall, distinguished-looking man in a suit of khaki drill and wearing a polo solar topi. He rode with the ease of one who has sat in the saddle from childhood. Even at a distance he had an air of command and alertness.

The other cut a very different figure. He was being conveyed by his mount rather than riding it. His suit of white drill was stained with travel; patently, he was overcome by the heat. His bearing was dejected and disreputable.

At last the cavalcade entered the village, and passing through the silent crowds of tribesmen, approached the house of Ali Akhbar.

The Malik and Carr descended from the

tower to welcome the strangers at the postern gate. Courteously the men of Ali Akhbar helped them to dismount and led away their animals to water.

That Imam Din had ever seen Barsak before seemed forgotten. Carr had never known even Ali Akhbar so full of polite phrases of welcome as now. He was the epitome of considerate hospitality.

The tall European sprang lightly from the saddle and in fluent Persian acknowledged the Malik's greeting, then turning to Carr, addressed him with consummate ease of manner in the same language. It could not be denied that Rudolf Bessler had a winning way with him. It was difficult to avoid liking his perfect self-possession, his tactful consideration for others. His Persian was that of an educated Afghan, and with the linguistic genius of his people he spoke it in a manner most pleasing to the ear. He manifested no surprise in meeting a fellow white man in so remote a place as Barsak.

For a few moments he broke off into rather halting English and introduced Professor Parkins, travelling in the wilds, he said, for the advancement of science. Carr

exchanged a few words with him in his own language. He was astonished to find how unwillingly the words came to his lips. But the Professor was in no mood for conversation. Several days of travel amidst the dust and beneath a scorching sun had reduced him to a state of abject physical discomfort and mental irritation. Carr soon abandoned him for the society of Rudolf Bessler. In spite of his suspicion of the motives of the strangers, he felt himself succumbing every moment more and more to the charm of the Austrian adventurer.

Ali Akhbar, calm and unruffled, led off Imam Din, the Turk, to his chamber so that he could wash and remove the stains of the road. Likewise, Philip Carr saw to the comfort of Bessler and the Professor. All the while, Bessler chatted with a freshness and wit that was balm to the soul of Philip Carr, long since accustomed only to the rough ways of mountaineers.

At length, their toilet completed, the party assembled beneath the veranda upon the carpets which had been spread ready for them. Ali Akhbar and Imam Din might have been old friends reunited after a long

separation. Not a word passed their lips of their ill-omened meeting during the past cold weather.

Never had there been such a feast in the house of Ali Akhbar. Never was such a rich "pilau" placed before guests as the Malik had caused to be prepared.

Throughout the meal, Ali Akhbar and the Turk strove to outdo each other in compliment. Flowery metaphors and honeyed phrases pervaded the banquet.

Rudolf Bessler had a way with him. He completely fascinated Carr, long since used only to the stark simplicity of the mountain people. The Austrian was sophisticated, but a delightful companion. He realised that here was the one man who could make his scheme of carrying off the ore a success, but with the instinct of the descendant of a race of born diplomatists forbore from broaching the subject too soon.

In an airy, witty manner he spoke of the capitals of Europe, of the gay life of those who have wealth and know how best it may be expended. Lightly he touched upon the exhilaration of motoring in a Hispano-Suiza, of the pleasures of London and the Riviera.

He enlarged upon the virtues of a particular liqueur : he verbally painted a winter scene in the South of France : he spoke of the joys of Switzerland.

He was an artist in life—a decadent artist admittedly—but still an artist. His conversation was as seductive as the song of a “bulbul.”

Until well after sunset the feast continued beneath the veranda. Of the guests, Professor Parkins alone was silent. His “gaucherie” irritated Rudolf Bessler, but he concealed his annoyance. He had now grown accustomed to suffering in silence the grossness of an unadaptable mind dead to all the finer aspects of life.

At length the party broke up, each of the three guests being shown to his chamber.

Not a word had been said of the object of the coming of the strangers.

CHAPTER XLI

THE TEMPTATION OF PHILIP CARR

THE night passed, hot and without a breath of wind. Sleep came not to Philip Carr: until the dawn he turned from side to side upon his "charpai" a prey to the thoughts aroused in his mind by the coming of Bessler.

Until now he had thought that he had finished with civilisation for ever. He had thought that he could exist happily amongst the bare hills of Kunar. The East draws the white man away from his own country: the desire for the women of his own race lures him back. And thus it is that men lead the lives of a shuttlecock tossed from one side of the world to the other, never satisfied, never resting even in their old age. Amidst the beauties of Kashmir, they dream of some girl in white tennis kit on a green lawn at home: but when they are with that girl they long for the splendour of Kashmir. But

until now, Philip Carr had thought he had circumvented this law by marrying Dil Afroz, and that with the birth of a son, all desire to return to his own people had gone for ever.

But now he longed once more to move at high speed over a level surface, to smell the ozone of the Tubes and the petrol of the taxicabs in the West End, to dine well, to see a show. He longed once more to sail upon the sea. Vividly blue waters rose up before his eyes. He felt the strong breeze of the broad Atlantic. He longed for the icy blasts of the North Sea. What joy it would be to stand again as he had done as a boy on the deck of an Iceland trawler with the sleet blowing in his face, as he rounded the sandy beach of Spurn ! And he thought of the delicate, refined face of his sister, sitting beside a roaring fire of coal, pouring out tea. He heard again her soft voice telling him why she found so much in the pictures of Turner, why she disliked Burne-Jones, and where Sir John Lavery was right and Augustus John wrong. In an agony of indecision he gazed at the pitiless stars. It was a night pregnant with evil and futility.

Unrefreshed, he rose with the dawn to

find Bessler, in a well-cut suit of tussore, smoking a cigarette in the courtyard. He could not conceal his pleasure at meeting him. For the first time he felt ill at ease in his Pathan clothes.

Without any restraint, the two fell into easy conversation. There was nothing of the clumsy German dictator about Rudolf Bessler. He let it be seen that he assumed that Philip Carr was on his side. Should not white men in the East always stand together and help each other against natives, even if thereby occasional injustice should be done?

It was impossible to dislike Rudolf Bessler. He had the gift of placing every man he wished to conciliate perfectly at his ease. He was a past master in the art of conversation. Philip Carr felt that Bessler understood everything he was going to say, long before he said it.

Bessler, too, had taken a strong liking to Philip Carr and conversed with perfect frankness.

"Imam Din is drunk," said Bessler. "He does not even observe the laws of his own faith. His unspeakable presence will not annoy us to-day. The Professor has sand-fly

fever and, I hope, will stay in bed. There is no hurry in this enterprise of ours. The camels which are following us cannot possibly arrive for another three days. Still, I see no reason why we should not do a little prospecting. The smell of this village rather annoys me, if you will excuse my saying so."

For the first time since his arrival, Philip Carr sniffed the pungent odour of the rubbish heaps with genuine dislike. Without a thought of consequences, Philip Carr and Bessler set off at a leisurely pace down the valley towards the City of the Dead.

Neither noticed the stony faces of the tribesmen as they passed through the village. On the roof sat Ali Akhbar with a face as that of a stone image. His black eyes followed them until they vanished out of sight up the nullah that led to the "stupa" by the Dead City.

As they walked along, Philip Carr found himself telling Bessler all he knew of the deposits of gold and radium ore in the forbidden valley. The Austrian, on his part, was equally frank. In an amusing, half cynical way, he sketched the character of Mr. Mark Levine, the financier who was behind

the enterprise. "Alas!" said he, "it is almost impossible nowadays to be an adventurer and still remain a gentleman, I fear. You note that Levine has not come upon this project personally. How I should have enjoyed watching him compete with that old Malik of yours! I must admit that our civilisation produces a large number of abominably low types. Barbarism has its 'points.' "

Regardless of the sun, they wandered through the ruins of the Dead City. If Bessler had any greed in his composition, he concealed it well. He showed no signs of haste to reach the deposits, but paused several times on their way through to examine the remains of a statue or a tiled bathroom. Every time he seemed to Carr to make the right comment and to clothe it in the right words.

At length they came to the sheer face of the hill-side where the valley which held the treasure branched off from the plateau. Bessler, without any hurry, picked up a nugget, examined it carefully and then, pronouncing it as exceedingly rich, flung it away.

"We must bring the Professor here tomorrow," said he. "We shall want his opinion on the radium ore. I should imagine it will require careful handling. Let us wander back—I confess I feel rather hungry."

They strolled back to the village, talking the whole time. To every tribesman sitting in the shade it was evident that the two had become friends. The liking they had taken to each other was patent to Ali Akhbar as he watched them enter the courtyard. So engrossed were they in conversation that they failed to notice him as they walked towards Bessler's room, where they sat down to a meal which both heartily enjoyed.

Soon the torpor which comes upon the East after midday descended upon Barsak. Bessler, feeling drowsy, suggested that they should sleep, and unwillingly Carr left him to seek his own room.

But the moment he had left him, Carr became once more the prey of indecision. Why should he not flee with Dil Afroz and his child and abandon the treasure? He negatived the thought as soon as it arose. Encumbered with a woman and a baby he could never escape the fleet "lashkar" of Ali

Akhbar. It would be better to join forces with Bessler and Imam Din and by skilful diplomacy assist them to remove the treasure. He would then be able to go away in safety with them along with his wife and child.

And yet he felt a curious unwillingness to do this. It did not seem an honest thing to do. The more he thought, the more he disliked the project. Would that the day had never dawned when the strangers had come to Barsak! He felt that by so doing he would be a traitor to the people who had welcomed him, whom he had made his own.

Through the long, weary hours of the afternoon he thought much, and came to no decision.

Meanwhile, without, the tribesmen seated in the shade talked quietly amongst themselves.

CHAPTER XLII

DECISION

AT length, with the fall of evening, Philip Carr left his darkened room and climbed on to the housetop. Here, his arms folded, he watched the sun setting behind Khair Sappar, as he had often done before. The last long shafts of light enwrapped the mud walls and towers of Barsak in a golden mist. Around the wells and threshing floors the tribesmen sat in little groups, but from them rose no glad shouts of laughter. On the face of each was a wild and sullen look.

At last the sun was gone. A few pale stars came out in the darkling sky. Away to the east, the moon peeped up, a deep rich orange. Gloom seemed to have descended upon all things.

But with the end of the day a great light came to Philip Carr. With decision he strode to the edge of the flat roof and leapt down into

the courtyard. A few quick strides brought him to the room of Dil Afroz. He opened the door and quickly closed it behind him.

Seated upon a carpet spread on the "matti" (stamped earth) sat Dil Afroz, the baby asleep in her arms. She looked up at her husband with an expression of infinite softness in her ever-changing eyes. In the light of the tiny lantern that lit up the bare room, her features had all the sublimity of the Madonna.

Quietly Philip Carr seated himself upon the rug by her side, and placing his hand upon her shoulder looked long into her eyes. For some time there was silence between them.

At length, in a quiet and even voice, he said : " Little one, I know and you know there is great danger hanging over us. All day I have been tempted to flee from it, taking you with me. I have felt again the deep desire for my own country and my own people. But it cannot be. And not only over us, but over the whole tribe, hangs the fear of a great disaster.

" We know that in the valley behind the City of the Dead lies wealth beyond even the

dreams of the greatest of the Moguls. But evil only can come of it. If, in the outer world, men learn that it lies here, misery and death will be the result. The Russ will know, and the Amir Sahib will know; evil men in many great cities, hearing of it, will plot and plan the overthrow of our people. They will steal from us our barren acres. In place of the fierce but manly hillmen of to-day, there shall arise a weak and corrupted race—a race of dissipated and evil weaklings whose only thought will be of the means to gratify their lusts. The civilisation of the West shall come here and pass through the hills like a flame; but it will not be the flame of a great new religion, it will be a conflagration consuming all things. Even for my own people, who through long generations have learnt to endure it, it seems at times a thing of failure and deceit.

“ But it is not too late to act. Imam Din, the Turk, and the two white men are in our power. Were they destroyed, the danger would be averted for many years, and we should remain as of old, as free as the eagles upon the heights. But, between me and the man they call Bessler is a liking I cannot

stifle. I would that he should live on. Until now, I have not known which way to turn.

“ But now a great light has come to me. In order that our sons may grow up free and strong, he also must die.”

He was silent for a few moments. Then he continued : “ I now go to see the Malik. I will tell him that I also see the danger which threatens the tribe and that I also am on the side of his people.”

But Dil Afroz was unconvinced. “ Would it not be better for us to flee to Hindustan ? ” she said. “ Akhbar Shah, who loves you even more than his life, would aid us.”

“ That cannot be,” replied her husband sadly, knowing that she thought only of the life of the child. “ In Hindustan or in my own country, you and our child would be outcasts, neither of the East nor the West. Besides, never in my life have I fled from my responsibilities. These people are also my children, and I would not that evil should come to them.”

He mused sadly for a few moments, realising that there are things which no woman can ever understand. It is man, not

woman, who is the great idealist of the world. Man whom the gods invented so that they should not be bored, so that they might look upon and be amused by a being unique in the universe, the one being who acts not entirely from self-interest: the one and only real freak upon the earth. But woman they made like the other animals, so that the race might go on and the greatest of their diversions be perpetuated.

He rose and, opening the door, went out into the silent courtyard.

In a quiet but penetrating voice he called out for Allah Ditta, the servant of the Malik.

After a few minutes, Allah Ditta stood before him.

"I would speak with the Malik," he said.

"The Malik sleeps," replied the servant. Carr hesitated a moment. There was no hurry, he argued, to wake the Malik. It would be expedient to wait until the morning when, with a clear brain and a hopeful heart, he would bring back the Malik to his side.

He dismissed Allah Ditta with a nod of the head, and turned to re-enter the room of Dil Afroz.

But as he did so, the gaunt figure of Akhbar Shah appeared from the shadow.

"It would be well to flee to-night, Excellency," he said in a low voice. "I am ready to go with you, even now."

"I am no coward that runs away," quietly returned Philip Carr. "I stay."

Akhbar Shah replied not a word. He knew that every tribesman was ready to fall upon the white men and slay them. He knew that even now they awaited the order of the Malik for the massacre to begin. He knew that if there was much more delay they would fall upon them whether Ali Akhbar willed it or not. But he also knew that there was no arguing with Philip Carr when he had come to a decision. He was aware that he himself, also, would be a victim of the slaughter.

And yet he silently walked away and, as usual, lay down upon his bed. He was soon asleep.

CHAPTER XLIII

J AEL

PHILIP CARR, without another thought, returned to the room of Dil Afroz. He had suddenly become very tired and, with scarcely a word to his wife, stretched himself upon the bed and fell asleep.

In the feeble light of the lamp, Dil Afroz gazed long upon the face of her husband, Philip Carr, set firm though in repose. A terrible conviction came home to her—she had never really understood the man. There was something elusive about his personality which she could not grasp. Always he seemed to act from motives which were incomprehensible to her essentially practical mind. Never had he seemed such a stranger to her as now. And yet at no time had she loved him so much as at this very moment, as he lay stretched out exhausted upon the string bed.

She realised now with terrifying certainty that she had never understood why he had come to Barsak. If he had come in search of the riches of the valley behind the City of the Dead, she would have been in no doubt from the very outset. Not until after their marriage had he told her the story of his last meeting with her father, John Rosières.

She recalled vividly his description of the scene. Philip Carr had been a trusted warrior in her father's "lashkar" in the big war that the white folk had fought amongst themselves some years back. On the night before the foray in which he died, her father had, in a few words, told Philip of her existence, saying that if his fate ever took him to Kunar, he would like him to give her any aid of which she might stand in need.

And yet Dil Afroz had never succeeded in finding out whether her husband was under any obligation to her father; apparently, there existed between the two merely cold and distant respect. Neither owed the other any service whatever.

If it was not for greed of wealth or to pay a debt of affection, what was it that had brought Philip Carr to Barsak? Was it merely the

desire for adventure? But, reflected Dil Afroz, the men of the hills never run great risks without the prospect of securing something in the way of loot, to capture a woman, or avenge a wrong.

Certain also was she that he had not come to obtain great power. Had this been the case, he would have displaced Ali Akhbar long ago.

And now, even though tempted by enormous wealth, even when his wife and child stood in great danger of their lives, he refused to flee. The man was moved by some strange idea which she knew she could never comprehend. And great was her sorrow, for she loved the man.

In the faint light of the lamp, she gazed long upon his face as he slept. Quietly rising, she tenderly placed the sleeping child beside him. No man would ever doubt that the child was his son. They had the same ingenuous features, the same frank expression. Even as his father the child would grow up, brave and generous, quixotic, caring nothing for power and wealth—the lusts for which, she had thought, dominated the lives of all men.

But not for nothing did the fierce blood of John Rosières course in her veins. Not for nothing was she the granddaughter of Ali Akhbar. Wild as the wildest of the hillmen was she, as daring and, when the need arose, as cruel and merciless. Was it not the custom of the women of her house in time of war to follow up the "lashkar" to slaughter the wounded and mutilate the dead?

In a fit of cold rage, she picked up the knife of her husband. She drew it from its richly-chased silver sheath—she tested the edge on her finger. She would murder Imam Din; then, of a surety, the danger would pass. Without Imam Din, the other two strangers would be powerless to do harm. They could be sent back to their own country and all would be even as before.

Quietly she opened the door and stepped out into the darkness of the courtyard. The moon had set.

Not a soul seemed awake. She was certain that no one saw her. She did not know that in a dark corner of the veranda her grandfather, Ali Akhbar, watched her every movement. Motionless, without making even the slightest sound, his eyes followed her across

the courtyard. He saw her quietly push open the door of the mud hovel where Imam Din lay.

On his bed lay Imam Din, fully dressed. For a moment Dil Afroz gazed upon the man. The light of a small oil lamp placed in a niche in the mud wall showed up his sallow features, covered with sweat. The odour of native spirit pervaded the room. From his abandoned attitude there was no doubt that he was drunk. His evil mouth hung loose. Slight involuntary twitches shook his frame. Like the lowest of the beasts he moaned in his uneasy slumber. He was revolting, abominable, obscene. A feeling of intense loathing for the man came over Dil Afroz.

She did not hesitate. With a quick deft movement she quickly plunged the knife into the throat of Imam Din. He gurgled as the camels do in the mating season.

With complete self-possession, Dil Afroz gazed upon her handiwork : then, turning her back upon the corpse, walked briskly across the silent courtyard. She flung the knife into the dust as she went.

Without haste, she opened the door of her room and re-entered, closing the door behind

her. Philip Carr and the baby still slept on peacefully.

With a sigh of satisfaction, she lay down by her husband's side.

But Ali Akhbar, who had seen all, remained standing in the dark corner of the veranda until the dawn.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE MERCY OF ALLAH

THERE was nothing complex in the character of Ali Akhbar, Malik of Barsak in Kunar. As the rising sun shot its first soft shaft of light down into the valley, he stepped forward with decision into the courtyard and called for Mahomed Shah, his jemadar.

Though freshly aroused from sleep, Mahomed Shah, a huge swarthy fellow with a cast in one eye, appeared from a hovel beneath the wall and stood waiting for orders. The fire of youth had returned to the Malik. He was again the keen, merciless leader of the men who had been the terror of the valley half a century ago. Again he was the Ali Akhbar who, long ago, had hewn his enemy Hazratai in pieces with a long knife, before the eyes of his wife and children; the Ali Akhbar who, in the night, had cut off the udders of the cows of the Itman Khel.

“Mahomed Shah, listen to me,” he said. “Seize the two white men who entered with Imam Din, the envoy from Kabul, the night before last. Seize also that devil, my grandson-in-law, and that daughter of iniquity, Dil Afroz, with her brat. And forget not to lay hands on the bringer of all our evils, Akhbar Shah. Fling them all into the room at the foot of the tower and bind them with ropes. Make haste and act while they yet sleep, and should they resist, strike them hard on the head with your rifle butts, so that they may not come to their senses. I have spoken.”

Mahomed Shah was not slow to act. In a moment his fifteen men were gathered round him. Some rushed to the room where slept Bessler and the Professor, and in a twinkling of an eye had them tied up like bundles of firewood. Carr, surprised in a heavy sleep, was bound before he had time to resist. Dil Afroz, clinging to the child, seeing the fate of her lord, submitted to the inevitable; but the men, such was their respect for the Malik's flesh and blood, forbore from binding her tightly. Like the heroine of a Greek tragedy, she followed her husband to the tower, with

head held high and refraining from any display of emotion. She might have been an animated statue, carved by the hand of a sculptor of genius.

Akhbar Shah alone was taken with difficulty. With one blow of his fist he smashed the jaw of Mahomed Shah, and though rushed and overwhelmed by six men, managed to tear out the eye of one of them and bite the throat of another. A raging, blaspheming fiend, he was hurled into the room at the foot of the tower along with the others. The strong, iron-bound door was banged to and a great stone rolled against it.

In the semi-darkness of their prison, Carr looked around. Bessler, an ironical, half humorous smile upon his face, leaned against the wall. The Professor, like a mangy monkey in captivity, was gibbering with terror. Akhbar Shah, the great veins standing out in his forehead, strained at his bonds and rolled from side to side, like Prometheus long ago. At length he abandoned the struggle and morosely brooded in the corner. Dil Afroz alone seemed unmoved by either fear or despair. An infinite tenderness seemed to radiate from her. With the all-

embracing benevolence of the mother of the earth, she smiled upon her child as it played in the dust and leaned against her husband, Philip Carr. For a long time they conversed in low voices.

The day wore on. Inside the tower the heat became more and more oppressive. The sweat stood out in great beads on the foreheads of the white men and glistened on their brick-red necks. The baby slept. Bessler, after long thought, recovered his old nonchalance. He realised that escape was impossible and that all that remained was to quit the world with at least a display of elegance. Carr, too, knew that they were doomed. At last, the merciless spirit of the hills which brooks no intrusion had risen and taken its vengeance.

Towards afternoon, Bessler brightened a little, regretted that he could not smoke a cigarette, flippantly alluded to Levine, the real author of their misfortune, rallied the Professor upon his ignorance of the essentials of life, remarking that great scientific knowledge seemed to be of little use in helping man cheerfully to bear misfortune.

Carr, leaning against Dil Afroz, paid little attention to Bessler's sallies. A succession

of memories passed through his mind. Suddenly he recollected a half-forgotten manuscript and its half-forgotten problem. Apparently apropos of nothing, he remarked : " Tell me, what is that which is most to be desired in all the world ? "

" Life and light and love," said Bessler promptly. He loved the discussion of abstractions.

" Power," said the Professor, testily straining at his bonds.

" Offspring," said Dil Afroz, with the conviction of one who has discovered a great truth.

Silent and sullen, Akhbar Shah glared at the crack of the door through which filtered a thin ray of light. Carr repeated the question in Pushto. For a long time the Pathan made no answer. There was silence in the room.

" The mercy of Allah," said Akhbar Shah. From without came the murmur of many voices.

CHAPTER XLV

EXEUNT OMNES

THE sun set behind Khair Sappar and the stars came out. The courtyard of the house of Ali Akhbar was packed with men, busy but silent. Almost without noise, they piled great stakes of wood and straw around the tower.

Ali Akhbar, grim and full of purpose, surveyed the work from a heap of rubbish piled up in a corner of the courtyard.

The work was soon finished. The tribesmen fell back from the tower, and stood in little awestricken groups along the walls.

With the quick step of a stripling, the Malik approached the tower, and with a match lit the pile of wood and straw. Soon all around the tower was a raging cone of flame.

For several minutes not a sound escaped the crowd. Then, with a mighty crash, the great tower heaved over to the ground.

At that very instant, a huge, bearded figure, almost naked, bearing a bundle, burst out of the raging furnace, and, pushing aside the astonished tribesmen, was lost in the darkness. At the last moment, when the walls of the watch-tower were tottering, Akhbar Shah, with a supreme effort, had burst his bonds and, seizing the child, dashed through the crashing mass of hard-baked mud and blazing timber.

Higher and higher leapt the flames. Clouds of bluish smoke and sparks blotted out the sky.

A huge flame larger than the rest lit up the whole valley. On the foothills, scarce a hundred yards away, a figure stood out against the sky. Holding the baby of Philip Carr beneath his arm, Akhbar Shah paused for one moment in his flight and, with right hand upraised, hurled defiance at the Malik and his tribe.

The great flame sank. Soon only the red glow of the ashes challenged the supremacy of the stars.

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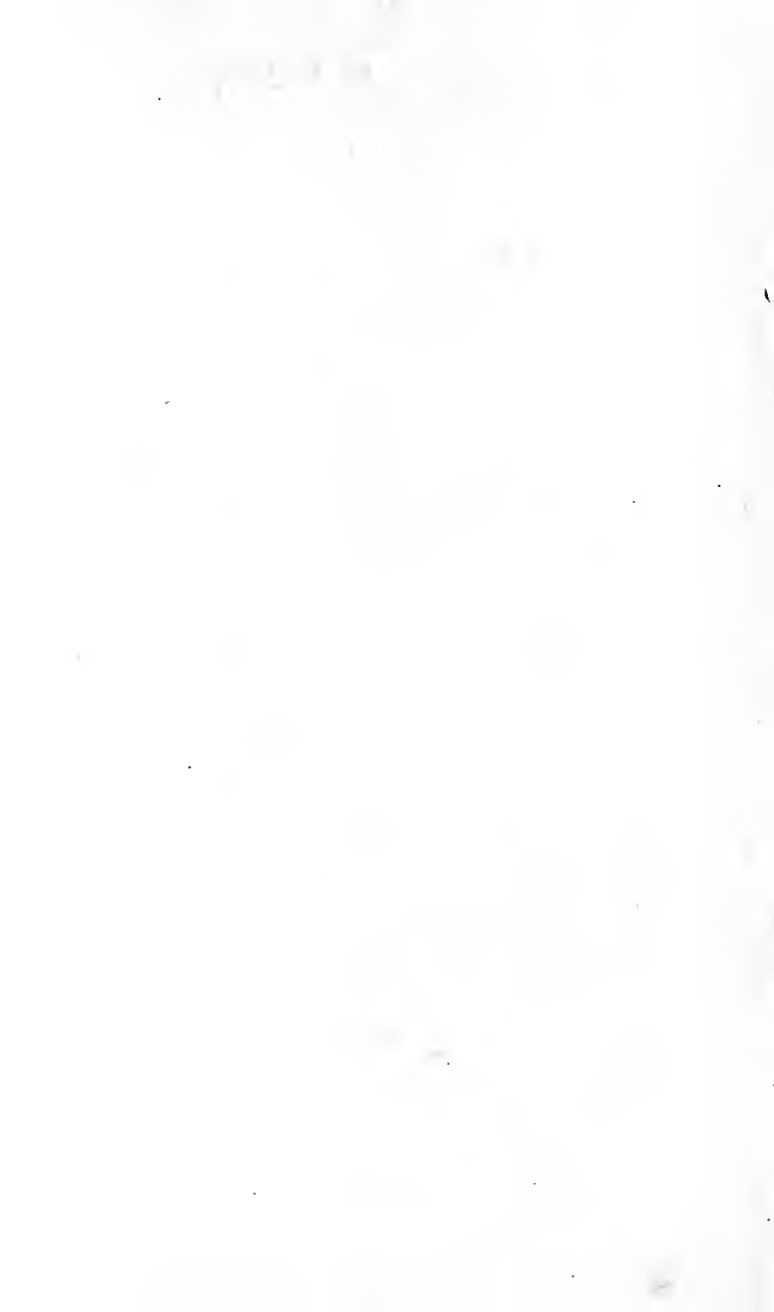
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